Between

The Legacies of Vico: Philology, the Internet, the Posthuman

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I am here not as a scholar of Italian studies, obviously, and not only as a student of comparative literature, but as an American intellectual who for various occasional reasons – completely unrelated ones, it turns out – has been compelled to think and write about the influences of Italian thinking on the current intellectual and political scene. It seems to me that in a furiously Americanizing environment in which Italian youth, like much of the world's youth, has been hypnotically transfixed by the digital invasion of their consciousness, and where mobile devices have turned communication itself into a one-way street where actual dialogue is impossible, and where critical analysis is arrested, that invoking "philology" might seem a losing proposition from the very start. The rich traditions of philological thought and practice, above all in Italy, over the last several centuries, is bound in this context to be even less prized in this setting for being so overfamiliar to many of you – an archaic and haplessly "square" allusion to the outmoded methods drummed into Italian schoolchildren for far too long. So why bring these coals to Newcastle, as it were, especially when coal is itself passé, and we look instead to solar options?

To answer these questions would mean to recall – again, with the risk of seeming belated – the still relevant work of Antonio Gramsci, or the new Italian political thinkers who grew out of the counterculture movements of the far Left in Italy during the 1970s – Negri and *autonomia*, that is; and, finally to Edward Said's career, which was largely about creating a counter-tradition based on the great early

eighteenth-century humanist, Giambattista Vico. For all of these are the "Italian" figures that for various reasons have loomed large in my own intellectual formation, and that I have addressed (in Negri's case, very critically), and to which I would like to refer as an opening gambit as I address all of you here in the context of the annual meeting of the Italian comparative literature association.

Vico, as you all know only too well, was an antagonist in his own time to the philosophy of Descartes (from which so much French theory of the 1970s and 1980s circuitously derived) and also of Descartes' like-minded contemporary, Spinoza, who is the current talisman of the new Italian thinkers – their philosophical point of departure from that great Vichian thinker, Hegel, the philosopher they set out to displace. Suffice it to say that the claims of Italian thinking in these very diverse, and even incompatible forms, are fairly extravagant right now, despite the internet-driven anti-intellectualism to which I just referred – and this is the setting for my comments below.

Given our conference theme of "l'immaginario politico," I wanted to make a case for reacquainting ourselves with the social theory of the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries insofar as that theory (on rare occasions) anticipated the anticolonial thought of the early twentieth century. And that would be the next phase of my gambit: to argue that the biggest issue facing intellectuals today, and the framework within which all of our work on political language and literature is found (including the saturation of youth cultures by electronic narcissism and visual and aural distractions) is the imperial imaginary. Whatever allows us better to diagnose the mental hold of empire in this stipulated period of imperial obsolescence is vital and pressing – that absurd *post*colonialism that announces itself suspiciously at the very moment of new grand American strategies for redrawing the map of the Middle East, eviscerating all secular forms of Arabic and Persian statehood, and reassembling the former European colonial powers to invade oil-rich African state like Libya. What, in other words, in all our theories is the evidence not in theory, but in intellectual history, of the resistance within our own traditions to this imperial imaginary. *That* is the question that I would like to pose, and

it is the one that I have tried to pursue in my own writing. I am trying to establish, in other words, a prehistory to anticolonial thought that can be found in eighteenth-century Italy, although it is arguably a way of thinking borrowed by Vico from fourteenth-century Tunis, in the work of ibn Khaldun: a precursor he almost certainly read and learned from. The contemporary relevance of this strand of intellectual history can be brought home, perhaps, by recognizing that it produced political and aesthetic forms in the early twentieth century in the movements of international communism.

A historically new anticolonial spirit found in the Third International of the interwar years in Europe descends from a tradition of thought around a figure who is generally, if vaguely, known today, but who in his own day was quite obscure: the Neapolitan rhetorician, Giambattista Vico. Again, for all the overfamiliarity of the name "Vico" in this setting here in Bologna – and I am painfully aware of it – I trust that this particular take on the figure is, for what it's worth, novel. The contemporaneity of this no doubt roundabout set of associations is found in the fact that the interwar moment, in my argument, is one whose debates we are largely echoing today. It was the time when challenges to European control first reached global dimensions and when resistance to the old order had for the first time the strategic and military means to threaten European hegemony rather than simply shame it. It was utterly unique in this sense, and we are still living off of its energies, and unable to transcend its agendas, which remain unrealized. The anticolonial common sense that most of us hold today was, in other words, a hallmark of the early twentieth century – especially the interwar period (not, as is often maintained, a result of the postcolonial turn of the 1980s and 1990s). The sense of a global common cause backed by sophisticated organizational networks and, as I try to show here, an already developed conceptual framework, was fully realized only between 1905 and 1940, when a new culture arose in the aftershock of revolution on Europe's semideveloped Eastern periphery, with immediate reverberations throughout Asia. These events profoundly affected intellectuals on both the Right and Left, and continue to do so.

Despite the voluminous scholarship on his work, there is virtually nothing that addresses the degree to which Vico's *The New Science* contains original propositions about vernacular modes of expression and civic values that speak to our contemporary focus on aesthetic forms of dependency, uneven development, and cultural incommensurability. Vico's speculative theses on poetic speech and the origins of language, together with the role of collective authorship in epic, as well as his elevation of secular reading over Biblical textual models, provide the basis not only for a nonparochial conception of world literature but also for a dissident model of international citizenship. This view, in turn, is enriched by Hegel, who in terms of intellectual history must be seen as a Vichian thinker, and this point, once established, has profound effects on the way we view twentieth-century Marxism (not to mention judge its future prospects). Hegel, like Vico his predecessor, shows at some length that Western conceptual forms relied on those from the East, and would have been unthinkable without them – a basically Khaldunian point.

It is precisely in a moment of the apparent postmodern dissolution of canons, the cheapening of the integrity of inherited artistic forms, and the everyday amnesia and indifference that media saturation itself generates, that we find resources in a Vichian civic hermeneutics – an aesthetic and a style that conforms more closely to the actual modes of non-Western or postcolonial literatures and the arts than do prevailing forms of European and American modernism. This hermeneutic may be said to dwell on the vulgate rather than the classical; on secular and corporeal solidarities rather than sacred textual encounters; and on the circulation of demotic and experimental forms rather than their containment within notions of aesthetic autonomy. If one is to understand, much less appreciate and promote, the actual writing going on in the so-called global periphery – and what could be of more interest to a gathering of comparatists like ourselves? – one must begin to appreciate that "socialist realism" is not a Soviet or Chinese phase of policy art but a sensibility that can be applied, by other names, to a civic tradition of letters with a long prehistory. A different story of the emergence of anticolonial thought

like this one may provide a new point of access and a potentially new set of projects and directions for comparative literature and postcolonial studies. A closer reading of Vico and the tradition he launched not only shifts our focus to different sources and inspirations but questions how we currently argue and read.

The unexpected attractions of Vico for anticolonial theory are obvious from three defining features of his work. First, his story of civilization's origins gives no priority to any one people, thereby refuting the principle of European centrality by way of Greece. If certain cultures were responsible for specific inventions such as navigation, the quadrant, the first alphabet, laws of the first free commonwealth, and so on, for him the drama of civic institutions is the work of everyone equally and separately (Vico 1968: 36): «By uniformity of ideas the orientals, Egyptians, Greeks and Latins, each in ignorance of the others, raised the gods to the planets» (4). Along the same lines, he notes that the "law of nations" is not an invidious natural law based on race or lineage but on the making of institutions (*cose*). His understanding of civic or national belonging depends on uprooting pedigree and natality as its main emphasis and replacing them with sociality[1].

Vico locates civilization (as opposed to barbarism) at the center of human activity, but not in the sense of a technological imperative. He refers, rather, to a civic breakthrough common to all humans in prehistory: the inventions of religion, marriage, and burial[2]. The very

[1] In current anthropology, the reigning position seems to invert Vico's antidiffusion thesis. Recent genetic research strongly suggests that human beings have a uniquely African origin, a finding that challenges views popular as recently as the 1980s based on a multiregional model of human origins as proposed by Franz Weidenreich in the 1930s. The African origins model arguably supports Vico's theory, however, since he emphasizes culture rather than physical characteristics; a single biological origin is its necessary precondition.

[2] See James Joyce, *Finnegan's Wake* (1976: 599): «sullemn fulminance, sollemn nuptialism, sallemn sepulture and providential divining.»

conceptions of barbarism and backwardness are in his portrayal displaced from their imperial deployment, and he reminds us that the organization of human faculties by means of which the propensity toward murder, rape, and ignorance was overcome only later turned into a device for distinguishing between the civilized and the barbaric. By the same token, Vico does not reject the idea of law or civilization (as is common today) because these have at times been oppressive; nor does disappointment with civilization provide the grounds for heroizing an earlier nomadism[3]. On the contrary the past sets the terms for a different outcome in the future. Every *ricorso* is a new possibility.

Second, Vico's theory of independent cultural creation anticipates the antidiffusion thesis prominent only later in the mid-twentieth century – one that was instrumental in countering the prejudices of the discredited "European miracle" thesis[4]. Vico proleptically displaces this still-mainstream twentieth-century variant on nineteenth-century notions of European supremacy. Proponents of the "miracle" held that instead of genetic inheritance, it was accident and opportunity that allowed Europe to surpass its global rivals: its favorable climate, the traditions of scientific inquiry made possible by the Reformation, the individualist ethos that arose from Christianity and encouraged innovation. Vico contests the view that Europe is the font of government, technology, or culture in ways that leave little doubt about his views on the equality of cultures, saying, for instance, that «the American Indians would now be following this course of

[3] For the addictively anti-Vichian momentum of current theory, in particular the rejection of all law qua law, see Giorgio Agamben's *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans* (2005); and *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy* (1999); see also Jacques Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign* (2009); and his "Force de loi: Le 'fondement mystique de l'autorité,'" *Cardozo Law Review* 11 (1989/90).

[4] Excellent critiques of the diffusion thesis and the "European miracle" can be found in James Blaut, *The Colonizer's Model of the World: Geographic Diffusionism and Eurocentric History* (1993) (esp. chap. 1); and Jack Goody, *The Theft of History* (2006).

human institutions if they had not been discovered by the Europeans» (414).

The third and final feature of Vico's aptness for anticolonial understanding can be discerned in his condemnation of conquest. Equating robbery and foreign domination, he says: «As in the first barbarian times, the heroes considered it a title of honor to be called robbers, so in the returned barbarian times [of the Middle Ages] the powerful rejoiced to be called pirates» (19). Similarly, he chastises the celebration of colonies in the ancient world, and his text is replete with asides that rebuke imperial attitudes – pointing out, for example, that Telemachus in the Odyssey calls non-Achaians the «other people,» «which is to say a subject people» (235). And above all, his seminal insight (as elaborated below) is to associate the inequality of classes with the invention of the culturally foreign. In an analysis later picked up by Hegel, Vico believed that colonial domination was originally the work of victims who had come to the city's protections too late, who were eventually driven from home, and who ended up plundering other lands. Colonies are formed «in order to avoid oppression and to find escape»; people risk «the hazards of the sea […] in search of occupied lands along the shores of the Mediterranean, toward the West» (13). One of the principal causes of the great migrations of peoples was to establish «heroic overseas colonies» (14) – certainly a strange reversal of the patterns of colonization in the modern era. But even as he makes this statement, its purpose has less to do with the distant lessons of antiquity than with confronting the colonial realities of his own time.

Is Vico current? The prejudices of the hyper-reality of the great media sleepwalk demand that we ask. The linguistic implications of his work, for one thing, dramatically reorient the story of the turn to language in twentieth-century philosophy. But even more, despite the fact that Spinoza has been the philosophical source for an influential school of contemporary neo-Marxism, Vico is by far the more likely precursor to Marx. This is so not only because he defends history and historiography against their detractors (a move popularized by Althusser's rejection of historicism) or because he so elaborately

portrays class struggle and the centrality of labor, but because Vico invents the idea that specific ideas, linguistic innovations, and forms of art correspond to a period's conditions of social organization. He inaugurates, in other words, a nonpresentist form of historicism that is the genesis of Marx's historical materialism. Vico's importance for Marxism may lie even more clearly, though, in his *ricorsi*. Against the backdrop of the Fall of the Berlin Wall, the emergence again, after great effort, of that which had been roundly defeated earlier is not simply possible but wholly logical in his particular mapping of human time. Because history as he imagines it is never exactly repeated, we can be sure that it will reappear in forms we cannot yet imagine.

The troubled sense of the term "philology" today (in the aftermath of Said's *Orientalism*, in part, but also in a number of recent essays and books chastened by the apparent cob-webbiness of careful, historical, textual work in an age of disposable verbiage and evanescent visualization) is clarified in Vico along the lines of a generalist intellectual program that, in later centuries, would be vital to the Left Hegelian tradition. By "generalism" I mean deliberate non-specialization in an area of knowledge roughly equivalent to today's academic disciplines; I mean the auto-didactical, but also the improvisationally dissident, refusal to conform to specialization in order to study adequately the whole picture, across disciplines, or what in an earlier lexicon was known as the social totality. By generalism one also means a rejection on epistemological grounds (which are also political ones) of atomistic theories evident in the auto-poeisis of Italian *autonomia*, or in the deeply conservative monadism of systems theory in Niklas Luhmann and others, who deny that communication across constituencies takes place in society, or that there is any real contact of value, knowledge, or force among the isolated elements composing the social whole.

In Vico, finally, we find the early instruments for a de-centering of European culture and a respect for foreign peoples that is the basis of what would come to be known, further down the line, as world literature. My purpose here is to explore the reasons for the disjunction between Vico's appearance and reality. How, in other words, can he

today appear so out-dated and yet be at the head of a lineage from which many of our most contemporary ideas and frameworks are derived? My aim is to show the links between Marxism and philology in the ways in which they take shape in Vico's reception and in the form in which Vico's early eighteenth-century text contains them, however implicitly.

Despite Vico's perceived irrelevance in many circles, the shock of what *The New Science* proposes bears stating baldly to get a full sense of its insult to prevailing norms[5]. He is saying, after all, that civilization was the invention of brutes; that instinct, feeling, intuition, and figurative language are forms of reason; and that the first philosophical thought was based on poetic characters. Moreover, in a devoutly Catholic milieu, he builds his case on mostly pagan and Protestant sources[6]. With respect to the word "radical," his postulates had the capacity to scandalize followers of Descartes just as much as they did emissaries of the pope or, more to the point, the monks and priests who were his friends and whose goodwill he counted on in Naples, with his growing alienation from Cartesian freethinkers[7]. Vico's riposte to Cartesianism was a methodological coup. Humanistic studies have as their goal *vero* (the true), the sciences *certo* (the certain). It is in the fancies and rough verbal utterances of the vulgate, in other words, that Vico finds relief from the fictions of math. The scientist's arbitrary postulates (let *x* be 1) offer up a merely deduced, and therefore sterile, certitude.

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[5] Jonathan Israel's *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650–1750* (2001), for example, places Spinoza at the very center of the founding of modernity (not even Leibniz is given similar space), relegating Vico to a small entry where he is cast, quite inaccurately, as a reformulator of Spinozan motifs.

[6] See Max Harold Fisch, "Introduction" to the *Autobiography of Giambattista Vico*, 1944: 43.

[7] For example, while he was still growing up, these would have included such people as «Giacomo Lubrano, a Jesuit of infinite erudition» and «Monsignor Geronimo Rocca, Bishop of Ischia and a distinguished jurist,» whose nephews he tutored (Vico 1944: 118).

These contributions to a literary science of "imperial form" are a way, also, of treating the whole vexed (and tired) history of the socialist past more ethnographically and hermeneutically, reimagining them again, since there is literally nowhere else to go. To put this another way, Marxism and philology belong together, and the interwar era's central figures, moreover, consciously understood this to be the case. Marxism's importance to peripheral aesthetics might be traced by way of three developments descending from this lineage: 1) the socialist "republic of letters" – a worldly network of vernacular forms that continues to reflect the actual writing from the global periphery; 2) "Moscow philology": the neglected role of communist intellectuals in preserving, editing, and giving form to the endangered manuscripts of global dissidents; 3) the persistent critique, and even mockery, of literary modernism and the avant-gardes, both as a style and social outlook, across the global spectrum of left anticolonial thought – a critique that spans César Vallejo's parodies of surrealism to Bakhtin's introduction to *Rabelais and his World*. What arises is a literature opposed to *irony* itself – the inheritance of Vico's and Hegel's little known philosophical assault on irony.

Marxist literary theory is not captured adequately by the familiar concepts of reflection theory, base and superstructure, agitprop, or ideology critique. They never have been. That criticism requires, rather, a new set of categories drawn, as it always was, from anticolonial terrain: montage, unevenness, vulgarity, sacrifice, and polemic. I am suggesting that the radical position today in theory – the truly subterranean, oppositional or antinomian one -- is not to be for the posthuman, or to critique humanism, but to articulate the human as collective agent. I am saying, also, that there is a historical link between the posthumanism that informs so many of our ostensible radical theories today and the decentering of the human in the natural sciences in the name of the objectivity of nature: that is, there is a linkage between radical theory and the mainstream corporate/ government complex regarding the supremacy of science over the humanities.

Posthumanism is generally seen as a criticism of the Eurocentric and by the humanist mainstream of contemporary state power; but I

would suggest just the opposite – that capitalism is inherently posthumanist, as symbolized by the military drone, by its addiction to science fiction, by its matrix-like imagined and now partly realized worlds of "managed" life, patented life, domesticated life, and invented life. The very concept of collateral damage in bombing campaigns, or the way that companies give names to consumers that suggests their characteristics as "its" rather than his or hers: We know something of the history of this from the link between cybernetics as formulated in the Macy conferences of the immediate postwar period and the attempt to create a man-machine matrix for the maximization of labor in the factory. Government-corporate theory has extensively promoted not an untrammeled humanist sublime – as much of our theory in the humanities suggests – but just the opposite: a view of the human separable from his or her minds, interchangeable parts, managed "wet-ware." It is the theories of early cybernetics that posthumanist theory has enthusiastically drawn on in its effort to demote the human as the creature that has created ecological devastation and deserves to be cut back.

Arguably, it can be shown that this frightening utilitarianism finds comfort in, and was anticipated by, political ontology, with its Heideggerian residues, which later joins the dispassionate mechanical materialism of scientific method. The "revolutionary" postures of Silicon Valley, and the technological mesmerizing of the post-philological world of Facebook and Twitter is a more or less comfortable continuation of a Heideggerian ontological politics taken, with little change, from familiar interwar debates. This in part explains the relentless popularity of Heideggerian postures on the purported "left" of humanities theory, as I have argued elsewhere[8]. These postures, although tirelessly exposed by the Frankfurt School, have

[8] I explore this at greater length in *Wars of Position: The Cultural Politics of Left and Right* (2006).

also and more recently been thoroughly discussed by Domenico Losurdo, to draw on still another Italian source[9].

The obsolescence of the philological, in short, is belied by this discussion. A concession on our part that our theoretical debates are meaningless is misplaced as we reflect on our own fear that we have all been outmaneuvered by internet culture – which, after all, does not so much pose a different argument about virtue, politics, or taste as obliterate the conversation over shared meaning. Such a judgment would be misplaced, or at least precipitous, because the thought-structures underlying this apparently new departure – the brave new world of global citizens, stateless power, and universal authorship upon which internet euphoria depends – has a prehistory that authorized it, and that was given an earlier form subject to hermeneutic skepticism. The philological – seen here, in principle, as the idea that meanings depend on intentions, that texts can be interpreted in better or worse ways, that meanings are historically situated, and that reading entails responsibility -- is rejected because that hermeneutic operation was never attempted, and the intellectual history never studied or learned from, not because the knowledge has been acquired and a different conclusion simply drawn.

In this sense, the very idea of the historical "rupture" should give way to thinking about continuities: that there is, paradoxically, a subversive potential to the idea of continuity (not least in regard to combatting and outwitting the claims, today, to the End of History; which means, seeing the socialist past as giving us many of our most important social democratic traditions – and certainly our anticolonial ones as opposed to postcolonial – and in regard to our own "ricorsi" (return or recourse) to get socialism right next time by experimenting with our own earlier failures.

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[9] For the exposure of interwar political ontology, see for example, Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (1994: 61-134). See also Domenico Losurdo, *Heidegger and the Ideology of War: Community, Death, and the West*, (2001).

The relative advantages to an anticolonial comparative literature of historical continuities rather than ruptures can be expressed in the image of "borrowed light."[10] In that image we find the lack of novelty at the core of our incessantly modernist language of rupture, Copernican revolution, paradigm shifts, "turns" of various sorts, epistemic breaks, and so on. I am wondering whether it isn't time to take stock of the inherited terms of this modernist gesture. Many of us see the only authority for one's position to be its radical break from the past whereas it is demonstrable that almost all of our debates (their terms, themes, and problems) are lifted more or less wholesale from the early twentieth century: in my view, above all the interwar period of Europe and its colonies. There is something clarifying, and even liberating, about being freed from this pseudo-radical pretense of the "never before seen" or the "year zero of the now" by recognizing that knowledge and discovery are largely about finding our way back to, and reinventing for ourselves, what others before knew and made; but also that this rediscovery and reinvention, at the heart of Vico's enterprise, is never exactly the same, and so the recurrence that this seems to suggest is not circular but spiral. It makes us at any rate more modest, more sober, and more respectful of the past upon which we depend and on which we build.

We also borrow without knowing we borrow, since history now has been demoted, and is seen by many to be no longer necessary, and since, in any case, we have supposedly superseded that earlier self, and need not be worried about what we have *become* on the basis of the past, but what we simply *are*, our being, which is itself considered in the current rhetoric "productive" – another version of the interwar political ontology that I referred to above. But there is also a more deliberate and disingenuous borrowing, most especially from the vast reservoirs of Marxism, since in a period of empire resurgent like our own, of historic defeats and disorientation, it is the one edifice of

[10] I take up this image at greater length in *Borrowed Light: Vico, Hegel and the Colonies* (2014).

indisputable radical authority. And here the borrowing, when grafted on to the notion of rupture above, is injurious, often malicious, insouciant but in any case freely inventive, and does violence to its source, if not fatally. Repeatedly, in other words, new left political innovations hostile to historical Marxism nevertheless find themselves compulsively returning to it in order to cancel it out by an unfriendly appropriation, but at any rate wishing to thrive off of its inherited energies.

"Borrowed light," then, as a paradigm for a contemporary comparatism. One that casts light on the present European crisis which is at once the *peripheralization* of Europe at a time that its imperial past returns in the form of waves of desperate immigration from abroad, and, at the same time, the residual reassertion of an older imperial role, a nostalgic attempt to put on the clothes again of a pre-social democratic exploitation of foreigners. The past in the present, although a present whose past has been altered and so is unique to this configuration. The need to learn that past outside the tyrannical, and basically bourgeois, bluff of the "new." The internet not as a paradigm shift, but a dumb prosthetics whose raw material is the assembled wisdom and writing of conventional books, papers, and archives. The parasitic relationship of Google search engines to the manual and mental labor of scholars, writers, and conventional librarians. The historical subject choosing, arguing, persuading, and making. Philology.

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