It is useful to divide post-war Italian intellectual culture into three distinct yet overlapping phases. Accordingly, the first period -- 1944 to 1968 -- distinguishes itself by a systematic process of institution building that promoted knowledge organisation from a Marxist perspective. Against opposing ideas from the centre (Crocean liberal secularism and catholic modernity) and the right of centre (conservative Catholicism), Marxist intellectuals increasingly hegemonised the public sphere. Important currents -- phenomenology, hermeneutics, semiotics, positivism, existentialism, textual criticism, Neo-Hegelianism, structural linguistics -- used Marxist ideas as positive and negative points of reference. 1968 signalled the triumph of Marxism in Italy. The second period, from 1968 to 1986, was marked by a massive production of cultural knowledge from within the Marxist paradigm, but also by an increasing fragmentation of the left. As a result, turbulent struggles emerged between various Marxist forces. There also re-emerged philosophical tendencies inspired by Husserl, Heidegger, Levinas and others that opposed Marxist interpretations of history, the subject and agency. The third period, from 1986 to 1999, witnessed the dismantling of the Marxist project. Positions derived
from French postmodernism gradually displaced Marxism altogether. Simultaneously, it was during this last phase that Italy’s cultural politics -- which had previously been organised predominantly in relation to modernist notions such as the territorial state, high cultures, and national identities -- gradually opened up to new conceptions of culture. These reflect Italy’s awareness of globalisation.

I. The Triumph of Marxism

In the period leading up to 1968, the success of Marxist cultural politics certainly cannot be viewed separately from the political power of the communist party and the symbolic capital it commanded in western socialism at large. Due to its leadership role in the resistance against fascism, the communist party’s promotion of socialist ideas in general and classical Marxism in particular was considerable in the immediate post war era in the forties. Italian Marxists -- Mario Alicata, Giorgio Amendola, Delio Cantimori, Lucio Colletti, Renzo De Felice, Galvano della Volpe, Palmiro Togliatti among many -- further developed their cultural politics through the fifties, and sixties. They did so in spite of considerable international pressures to promote liberal, rather than Marxist, political cultures and by overcoming domestic obstacles, such as the influence of the catholic church in educational and cultural institutions. An important event was the publication of Antonio Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks*. However, since Gramsci represented for the communist party primarily a political leader, rather than a theorist, the originality of Gramsci’s idea on culture remained unexplored. Classical Marxist aesthetics, as promoted by Zdanov in the Soviet Union or by Georg Lukacs’s aesthetic theory were important until 1956. Yet it should also be pointed out that leading Marxist intellectuals such as the political scientist Norberto Bobbio, the philosopher Galvano della Volpe,
linguists and semioticians such as Ferrucci Rossi-Landi and Umberto Eco and writers such as Elio Vittorini and Pier Paolo Pasolini, among many, persistently argued for open dialogue with new forms of knowledge from outside the Marxist paradigm. In this sense, even during periods of heightened Marxist orthodoxy, there always existed strong alternative Marxisms.

Until 1956, Marxist intellectuals shared with non-Marxist intellectuals above all a desire to internationalise Italian culture. This was clearly a response not only to the provincialism imposed by fascism but also to Italy’s relative inexperience in dealing with the institutional opportunities modern liberalism had to offer. Hence Rinascita or Società, major communist journals, promoted North American writers and philosophers as it familiarised its audience with institutional practices from other western cultures. Pragmatism, positivism and scientific methods were widely discussed. Faulkner, Steinbeck, Whitman and Hemingway enjoyed dissemination. This strategy was not dissimilar from that of liberal journals, such as Il Mulino (rivista mensile di cultura e politica) and Belfagor (Rassegna di varia umanità), which during that period also regularly featured Anglo-American, French and German intellectual products.

There was also, in this period, a significant interest in geopolitical topics on the one hand, and in the idea of a unified Europe on the other. Again, Italian Marxists shared these interests with liberal and catholic intellectuals alike. Debates focused on anti-colonialist struggles, developing nations and Islam. However, in the aftermath of 1956, marked by the Soviet invasion of Hungary and, above all, by massive information flows about the human costs of Stalin’s authoritarian regime, the Italian communist party, by separating its goals from those of the Communist International in Moscow, embarked on its own road towards socialism. It was eventually called the ‘via italiana al socialismo.’ Marxist cultural politics were deeply affected
by this shift towards italianicity. For if until the late fifties, Italian Marxists had vigorously participated in the project to internationalise Italian culture, activities which related Italy to larger global regions, they now increasingly launched upon what we may call a re-nationalising of their Marxist project. While this move is not unique to Italy -- in France and Germany nascent discourses on globality likewise no sooner appeared than they vanished -- its effects on Italy surely is. For to the extent that Marxism evolved into a powerful political force, informing social movements of unions, students, and women alike, it also turned into an intellectual force that reflected primarily not on the application of Marxist ideas in a global context, but on their applications in a local context. Hence the most important object of study were the concrete practices taking place in Italy. Cultural practices were no exception.

As Italian Marxists in large numbers seized the public sphere by the late sixties, they quickly set up positions of power in many institutions tied to the dissemination of knowledge. Publishing houses, journals, university divisions, cultural centres and local governments all contributed to the production of a Marxist public sphere. A Marxist framework, with its assumptions about the collective subject’s progressive ability to forge its own history, colonised Italy’s cultural unconscious. Major categories from within classical Marxism, such as base/superstructure, or the dialectical relation of politics, society, and culture to the economic sphere, greatly influenced the organisation of multi-volume encyclopaedias and historical studies in the area of philosophy, literature, art, and culture. So one of the most important research tools in historical studies, the Storia d’Italia, is clearly marked by distinctions derived from classical Marxism. In addition, the managers of such projects set up formidable interdisciplinary research collectives which included economic historians, political philosophers and social
historians. Since these scholars shared a Marxist understanding of history and culture, many of
these multi-volume projects are superb examples of theoretical coherence, first rate scholarship,
and remarkable breadth. Moreover, the disciplines of high status in Italy’s predominantly
humanistically oriented educational system -- philosophy, literature, and history -- soon showed
signs of the Marxist turn. All the studies written during this period are organised along Marxist
analytical lines. Examples are Carlo Salinari’s *Profilo Storico della Letteratura Italiana* (1972)
or Giuseppe Petronio’s *Letteratura e società. Storia e antologia della letteratura italiana* (1972)
and Alberto Asor Rosa’s *Sintesi di storia della letteratura italiana* (1975).

II. From Economic Analysis to Cultural Critique

While 1968 marks the triumph of Marxism in Italy, it should also be noted that the kind
of Marxism that emerged was by no means homogeneous. Many different theoretical currents
evolved. In this sense it is more accurate to speak of the triumph of heterogeneous marxisms.
The diversity of Marxist theories is tied to Italy’s geography and to disciplinary peculiarities.
While intellectual centres of the North tend to measure themselves against secularising French
and German currents, centres of the South display greater independence and flexibility. This
includes the flexibility to accommodate religious interests with radical principles, as in
liberation theology. By the same token, disciplines such as philosophy build their identity
primarily in relation to German philosophy. Yet in spite of the heterogeneity of Italy’s Marxism,
there are several distinct currents. Salinari, Petronio, and Asor Rosa promoted a Marxist
aesthetics in the tradition of dialectical materialism for instance. This tendency is based on the
assumption that the best of literature and art reveals the elements of a class struggle and
ultimately reflects, independently from the artists’s intention, a search for freedom throughout a
linear (western) history. Hence it is the critic’s function to identify the history of class struggle in the cultural texts. This position was called into question by a second major Marxist trend, namely by the structural Marxism of Galvano della Volpe. Here Marxism is postulated not as an ideology or a cultural instrument of transformation, but as a scientific method. As such, it is an explanation of the world and not a tool for change. Della Volpe rejects the dialectic ascribed to the economic base and the superstructure, and, above all, the power of the dialectic to effect social change, as Hegelian Marxism postulates. As in the structuralist model of Louis Althusser, cultural transformation is not tied to the logic of changes in the modes of economic production. It can develop a logic, and a power, of its own. As a result, della Volpe can decouple culture and art from the dictates of capitalist modes of production while simultaneously summoning art to revolutionary ends. Hence he can appreciate those aesthetic assumptions which inform the art not of realists, but of expressionists, surrealists and other avant-gardes. He approves writers such as Bertold Brecht, whose epic theatre promotes the production of critical yet open-ended interaction between audience, actors, playwrights and stage directors. This theoretical direction from within Italian Marxism, however anti-Hegelian, has ideological affinities with the cultural theory of Frankfurt School Critical Theory. It also facilitated a critical elaboration of French structuralism. All the same, it did not pose an ideological challenge to developments in the fields of semiotics, semiology and linguistics, where intellectuals in Italy, more than in other western regions, have produced pioneering work. Paradoxically, although Gramsci’s theoretical framework would have facilitated productive encounters between his analytical concepts and those of the Frankfurt School, of structuralism, and linguistics, in Italy such encounters have remained marginal to this day.
While classical Marxism offered Italy’s cultural revolution among students and women of the late sixties analytical tools with which to study the rise of capitalism in the west, it also insisted on the primacy of economic factors in historical change. In addition, Leninist versions of Marxism had insisted on the leadership of the working class, in the form of a party, as essential for a revolution. Yet attentive readings of Lukacs, Korsch, Luxemburg and Gramsci had suggested that the structure of capitalism, as described by the later Marx, no longer corresponded to those structures of capitalism which had evolved throughout the twentieth century. And moreover, analyses of post-world war two societies suggested that a service economy, buttressed by technologies of information, had increasingly displaced an industrial capitalism. Hence strategies for change would have to be anchored in theories which reflected the changing nature of the economy and society. Frankfurt School Critical Theory, structuralism and critical semiotics all offered a basis for developing such theories. What they all had in common was their analysis of the symbolic reproduction of power and domination. A critique of social and cultural practices, of the media and the structures of everyday life displaced the analysis of politics and economics. Through recourse to concepts developed by the Frankfurt School, such as authoritarian family structure (Horkheimer), one-dimensionality of existence (Marcuse), high art as resistance to mass culture (Adorno) and so forth, major Marxist journals and publications explored the validity of cultural critiques as instruments for social change. These explorations evolved against the background of polemics against and for the cultural programme of the communist party. Crucial in these debates were intellectuals such as Lucio Colletti, but also Massimo Cacciari and Gianni Vattimo. By the same token, intellectuals such
as Maria Antonietta Macciocchi and, somewhat later, Antonio Negri, maintained strong theoretical relations with Althusserian structuralism. Finally, intellectuals inspired by the work of Ferrucci Rossi-Landi and Umberto Eco pursued systematic research in the area of semiotics. Indeed, if traditional Marxists and Frankfurt School inspired neo-Marxists adhered to a concept of culture which privileged high culture over mass culture, it was in research devoted to semiotics, and not in the context of philosophy and history, that Marxist intellectuals discovered structures that govern the practices of everyday life.

With the advent of neo-Marxism, structuralism, and semiotics, Italian Marxism shifted its priorities from the economic production to the cultural spheres. Critiques of culture were now endowed with the power to effect substantive social change. Yet there was another important shift that accompanied these debates. With the advent of neo-Marxism, structuralism and semiotics, Italian Marxists abandoned their penchant for historicism, history, and historiography. This shift of focus towards the present, rather than the past, also re-validated the social sciences, which in Italy had been under fierce assault, given the influence of Croce’s anti-positivism, Mussolini’s anti-scientism and the prestige of the historically oriented humanities in the educational system. Where traditional Marxists and neo-Marxists would agree, in spite of all of their differences is, nonetheless, in their believe in the necessity and possibility of social change along egalitarian lines. With the accent on the potential of culture to effect social change, it should come as no surprise that all major Marxist traditions in Italy debated the leadership roles of the intellectuals. This is not only so because questions pertaining to the ‘intellectual’ is a key issue in Gramsci’s political programme. The question of the moral leadership of intellectuals is indeed one of the most persistent themes that emerges from many centuries of Italian culture.
Mainstream liberals and catholics renewed their interests in this issue under the impact of the
dynamic sixties, and the more they reflected on it, the more they moved to the left. Every major
intellectual journal that had systematically questioned the foundations of Marxism in the fifties
had become Marxist itself by the early seventies. Good examples are two journals from
Northern Italy, namely *Aut Aut* from Milan, and *Il Mulino* from Bologna.

### III. From Cultural Critique to Cultural Studies

There is no doubt that Marxism in Italy was more widespread than anywhere else in the west. Up until 1976, over half of the population voted for left parties. Since there has been historically no significant political tradition at the centre, the other half of the population voted for the conservatives or the right. While this polarisation of the electorate empowered the left to an unprecedented degree in the early seventies, it also endangered the left in equal measure by the early nineties, when new right wing movements tipped the political balance in the opposite direction. This powerful move from left to right is well documented. For if by the late sixties intellectuals believed in the capacity of reason and the public sphere to create social change, ten years later, by the late seventies, left intellectuals retreated into the private sphere. A crisis of reason was declared. Prestigious journals exchanged optimism for pessimism, chose Nietzsche over Marx, and body over class. Under the impact of French post-structuralism, Hegelian history was to make room either for Foucauldian histories without subjects, or for Heideggerian subjects without histories. Phenomenology and hermeneutics were called upon to authenticate a minimum of meaning in a postmodern age condemned to witness its own decline. Central to the debates about the crisis of reason were intellectuals such as Aldo Gargano, Remo Bodei, Carlo Ginzburg, and Gianni Vattimo. The latter formulated his theory around concepts such as ‘weak subject,’ a
‘new rationality,’ and a ‘weak thought.’ To this day, many intellectuals who identify with the discipline of philosophy have continued to adhere to a critique of reason, a critique which is premised on the unknowability of global processes and the impossibility of substantive social change. The work of Franco Rella, Giorgio Agamben, and Maurizio Ferraris are typical of this trend. Yet it must also be pointed out that this exodus from the public to the private sphere, and its concomitant abdication of moral leadership on the part of the intellectuals, as symbolised by the crisis of reason, is a phenomenon that seems to have affected male intellectuals only. Feminists resisted that call, at least until the early nineties.

As in other western nations, feminism in Italy evolved parallel to the student movement in the late sixties. Given the hegemony of the Marxist paradigm, Italian feminisms are marked by major divisions within the left, and by the left’s penchant to focus on national and western rather than global issues. However, Rossana Rossanda and Mariarosa Dalla Costa developed global agendas. By the middle of the seventies, a solid feminist culture, established on the basis of centres and collectives that sprung up in most cities, enabled the dissemination of feminist knowledge. Among the leaders are Lidia Campagnano, Carla Lonzi, Dacia Maraini, Lea Melandri, and Lidia Menapace. As the male philosophical intelligentsia retreated by the late seventies, feminist intellectuals seized the public sphere with their most original work. The Woman’s Bookstore of Milan, along with the Diotima group of Verona, headed by Adriana Cavarero and Luisa Muraro, developed the theoretical model of a social-symbolic practice between women. Discussions of this model dominated the public sphere until the early nineties. Influenced by the philosophical writings of Luce Irigaray, Diotima intellectuals built a model which focuses on a symbolic restructuration -- linguistic and conceptual -- of the unconscious.
and consciousness. They believe that such restructuration is possible on the basis of close interactions (entrustments) between older and younger women. Their project of liberation is thus based on the assumption that conceptual and symbolic processes are not separable from the male and female bodies that produce them, and that social and political equalities are attainable only addressing the conditions of symbolic and conceptual productions. The theoretical model developed by Diotima will remain the most original contribution to western second wave feminism by Italian feminists.

Feminists held on to Marxism until the early nineties. Under their influence, Italy’s leading intellectuals mounted a last minute campaign to prevent the demise of Marxism. With their journal *Micromega*, subtitled ‘reasons of the left,’ Norberto Bobbio, Franco Crespi, Gianni Vattimo, Danilo Zolo and others engaged in a battle for the left as late as 1986. What is significant here is that humanists finally joined hands with social scientists. The Italian public sphere would soon be haunted by scandals involving the corruption of political leaders, left and right alike. It would also be haunted by widespread corruption of its magistrates and its juridical system. But more importantly, Italy would soon participate in the radical transformations taking place known as European Unification. *Micromega* registers these transformations. On its pages, pragmatic social scientists replace utopian humanists. Massimo D’Alema and Walter Veltroni, who write for this and other journals, are public intellectuals with occasional ministerial posts in the left of centre coalition known as Ulivo. They are economists and political scientists. *Micromega* abandoned its references to the left by 1994. It renewed, as many Italian publications, its interest in the study of regional and local cultures, in cities, and dialects. Hence it shifted from a position of cultural critique to that of cultural studies, thereby loosing a
good deal of its critical edge. Yet this shift also signals an acknowledgment of the formidable challenges to received categories of analysis and critique. With the decline of the modern nation state, cities and regions, rather than a centralised state, will play an increasingly important role in the future. They will be called upon to mediate conflicts which Italy, as part of the European Union, will have to confront. Today, these conflicts pertain to the flow of immigrants and refugees from many parts of the world who enter Italy, often in order to stay. Under the impact of migration, particularly from Muslim majority countries, cultural operators need to rethink issues that go beyond Italy. And however belatedly, a search for new political and cultural models that can accommodate diversity has begun. Debates on the future of Islam in Europe have increased, and new disciplines, such as Mediterranean Studies have emerged. The newly established University of the Mediterranean in Rome symbolises the trend away from national studies towards regional studies. And interests in global and European issues, already apparent in the fifties, are now again pursued. This nascent attention to global and local issues can only be of benefit in the era of the network society which experiences an increasing interrelation between the local and the global.

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2. These first major editions of Gramsci’s writings in prison divided the material in such a way that it reflected the cultural politics of the CPI in those post war years, rather than Gramsci’s own organisation of his materials. In 1977, Valentino Gerratana edited Gramsci’s works in ways which respected the actual order of the prison notebooks. It became the standard edition and the basis for a major translation of Gramsci’s works into English. See Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere*, (ed) Valentino Gerratana, (Turin: Einaudi, 1977).

3. *Il Mulino*, a monthly journal of culture and politics; *Belfagor*, a journal in the humanities;

4. We can now identify this move inwards towards the ‘national state’ as a challenge to the inevitable trend towards transnational globalisation. See Alain Touraine, *Pourrons nous vivre ensemble? Egaux et Differents.* (Paris: Fayard, 1997).

5. While local governments organised cultural events which were free and open to all, the communist party staged a yearly ‘festa dell’unità,’ where the public could enjoy music, inexpensive food, and book exhibits.

6. See volumes 4.1, 4.2, and 4.3 of *Storia d’Italia, Dall’Unità A Oggi*, (Turin: Einaudi, 1975, 1975, 1976), which focuses on Italian history since unification. The first volume deals with economic history. It includes one of the major features of the Italian economy: its income from Italian immigrants working abroad. The second volume deals with cultural history. The third deals with political and social history. See also volume 3, *Dal Primo Settecento all’Unità*, which again is authored by several scholars from different disciplines and which again orders the material according to categories of social and political history, economics, and culture.

7. Salinari (Rome: Editori Riuniti); Petronio (Palermo: Palumba); Asor Rosa (Florence: La Nuova Italia); See also Giuliano Manacorda, *Storia della Letteratura Italiana Contemporanea (1940-1965)* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1974; first edn 1967).


14. The most important research in the area of language and society has been produced by the institute of philosophy and language sciences at the University of Bari in Southern Italy under the direction of Augusto Ponzio. Among his publications are Produzione linguistica e ideologia sociale (Bari: Di Donato, 1973); see also his Signs, Dialogue and Ideology (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1992). See also more recent work from withing this circle by Patrizia Calefato, Europa Fenicia, Identità Linguistica, Comunità, Linguaggio Come Pratica Sociale (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1994).

15. One of the recurring debates in Italy which dates back to the beginnings of Italian literature in the early modern period pertains to the so-called ‘Questione della lingua,’ the question of language. While immediate issues were concerned with whether Italian or Latin should represent the language of the ‘litterati,’ larger issues pertained to the linguistic presence of many diverse cultures in Italy, including popular cultures. Gramsci had addressed these issues when he sketched a history of Italian intellectuals in his prison notebooks.

sapere e attività umane (Turin: Einaudi, 1979).


23. See Massimo D’Alema, con Claudio Verlardi e Gianni Cuperlo, Un paese normale (Milan: Mondadori, 1995) and Walter Veltroni, un intervista di Stefano del Re, La bella politica (Milan: Rizzoli, 1995).
