

Creative Interventions

Creative Interventions:
The Role of Intellectuals
in Contemporary Italy

Edited by

Eugenio Bolongaro, Mark Epstein,
and Rita Gagliano

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P U B L I S H I N G

Creative Interventions: The Role of Intellectuals in Contemporary Italy,
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INTRODUCTION

THE GENESIS OF OUR PROJECT

EUGENIO BOLONGARO

This book is the result of a project that got under way a number of years ago. Its roots can be traced back to 2003, when the current editors organized a session on the role of the intellectual in contemporary Italy at the annual meeting of the North East Modern Languages Association. At the time, we were responding in a rather visceral and untheorised way to a growing sense of dissatisfaction with the general tone of much contemporary critical discourse, especially in Italian Studies. The beginning of the new millennium had witnessed the definitive ending of the protracted debate about postmodernism and, as a result, the issue of the political in literary and cultural theory had begun to reemerge in full force. However, even the most promising and well-developed approaches to this issue, such as post-colonial theory, seemed at pains to overcome the old dichotomies between autonomous and committed art, academic and militant criticism, etc. In sum, the discussion needed a kind of shock therapy which could match the shock of the present: the cultural scene was melting away under our very eyes and finally showing us the true meaning of “epochal” change. And yet, we could also identify a palpable cultural ferment, a cluster of phenomena which were beginning to shift the discussion significantly forward, in directions not canvassed by critics and theorists. Interesting and innovative interventions were being made by new voices on the Italian cultural and literary scene but could not properly be appreciated due to a lack of adequate theoretical tools.

The 2003 session generated such a response that it has become a regular event year over the last few years. As a result, we have been able to canvass in a manner beyond our original expectations a wide range of approaches, perspectives, and criticisms of the project itself. This book is in a sense a record, of necessity a partial one, of these discussions, which we hope will continue and will be enriched by the contributions collected here.

It must be acknowledged from the beginning that, as the collective reflection widened and deepened, we made two fundamental discoveries. First, the range of approaches to and opinions on this topic was very vast indeed. Although this was not surprising in itself, a little more problematic

was the fact that we ourselves did not share a single perspective. Each of the three editors had special preoccupations and interests, and held significantly different positions on some, if not all, of the issues that emerged in due course. And this led to the second and more challenging discovery: the complexity of the problematics we had confidently approached was truly of staggering dimensions. It almost seemed that, at every succeeding session, a new set of issues and questions would emerge, so that we soon had to abandon the hope of tracing a comprehensive and definitive horizon. Little did we know, when we proposed this volume to our publisher, that we had entered such a rich but also intractably multifaceted field of enquiry.

This volume attempts to meet these challenges not by imposing a coherence we have not found and cannot produce but rather by espousing the heterogeneity which, for the moment at least, is the only intellectually honest answer to the situation. This does not mean that the authors whose work is presented here are committed to heterogeneity. On the contrary, all of us, though perhaps some more than others, are clearly committed to working toward a possible theoretical synthesis. As editors, we felt it was our obligation to tease out these threads of coherence, as well as the divergent elements, in the introductory texts that accompany each section of the book. In the end, our ambition is to present as clearly as possible both the heteroglossia and the dialogical interaction between the voices which have found a place in these pages. In this introduction, therefore, it seems appropriate to begin by mapping out not a precise territory but rather some of the general areas of debate and contestation which we have encountered along the way.

The Conjuncture

From the start, we were aware that our desire to revive the debate on the role of the intellectual originated in a specific conjuncture. It is undeniable that such a debate has had a long history in Italian culture, perhaps constituting one of the recurring leitmotifs in the intellectual life of the nation. The second introductory essay to this volume will canvass this historical dimension in some detail, thus providing the necessary context for the subsequent discussions. And yet, such a long history is marked by discontinuities as well as by continuities, by ebbs and flows which are clearly related to specific historical circumstances. Therefore, one of the first questions which we found ourselves asking as we undertook this project was: what aspects of the current cultural situation prompt us to rethink the role of the intellectual and, therefore, our role as

scholars?

The answer to this question is clearer now than it was when we first started pondering it: the key character of the current conjunction is a dramatic revival and proliferation of armed conflict. Indeed, we should perhaps conceive of our situation as akin to a state of war. While the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 ushered in a decade of triumphalism, which found its most extreme expression in the discourses of the “end” – the end of ideology, the end of socialism and capitalism, the end of history itself –, the attack on the World Trade Centre in New York, shattering that blind confidence, ushered in a new belligerent imperialism with its rhetorical corollary of the war on terror and the clash of civilizations. In the specifically Italian context, the controversy caused by Oriana Fallaci’s vitriolic attack on Muslim culture and unabashed claims of Western superiority were the first symptom of a new configuration of the cultural field: after a protracted decline, the “progressive intellectual,” a virtual tautology in Italian culture since the 1950s, was definitively buried. A complacent tentativeness when facing an increasingly complex world was replaced by an aggressive and regressive simplification. The future was unclear, though the concern over the future was obvious.

Immediately after the attack on the World Trade Centre, on the 24th of November 2001, a group of influential young writers met to discuss the new situation at a conference entitled “Scrivere sul fronte occidentale.” Perhaps this was too prompt a response to a crisis that has just began to gather momentum, and the contributions by the participants to this event, though interesting, are weakened by this sense of haste. In the ensuing years, the signs of a deepening concern multiply. One example will suffice: during the mid-2000s, Romano Luperini’s journal *Allegoria* hosts a number of articles on the predicament of the Italian intellectual by such important figures as Renato Barilli, Remo Ceserani, Giulio Ferroni and Alfonso Berardinelli, as well as Luperini himself. These debates and their outcomes are canvassed in some detail in the third introductory essays of this volume. All address a triple crisis: of the humanities, of literature and of criticism. Yet, one of the fundamental limitations of all these interventions is that none seems adequately sensitive to the impact of the state of war in which the George W. Bush era plunged directly or indirectly most of the planet. It should be noted that this renewed interest in the role of the intellectual is not exclusively an Italian phenomenon. Even in the United States, the country most directly responsible for the war and its consequences (as the old adage states, “the first victim of war is truth”), *Profession*, the yearly publication of the powerful Modern Language Association, devotes the first section of its 2006 issue to the role

of the intellectual, with contributions from such well-known scholars as Julia Kristeva and Ariel Dorfman, among others. As in the case of their Italian counterparts, however, these discussions fail to name and confront fully the “state of exception” to which they nonetheless refer (e.g., the riots in the Parisian suburbs, the impact of homeland security in the US).

Today, as we stand on the threshold of a new decade and can finally look back on the Bush era as belonging to the past, we should be able to reflect on the ongoing war with greater clarity and awareness. The worldwide economic recession, and the predatory financial practices that have played a key role in producing it, are also distinctly in sight and have contributed to undermining the neo-liberist rhetoric which drowned out any alternative view of economics and society. The time seems ripe, therefore, for a sustained meditation on the impact of the new world order on all intellectual work and especially on the type of intellectual work which is at the heart of this volume: artistic and literary expression. The crisis of the intellectual cannot but be inextricably linked to the time-space of an experience which over the past few centuries we have called literature, a time-space which today, borrowing a phrase from Claudio Giunta, a young Italian intellectual commenting on the current cultural climate, is under siege (*L’assedio del presente* 2007).

The Cultural and the Political: Theory and Practice

Whether we adopt Eugenio Garin’s suggestion in *Intervista sull’intellettuale* that the modern intellectual emerged in Italy in the early Renaissance, or accept the more canonical view that the intellectual was born in France at the end of the 19th century, concurrently with the Dreyfus Affair and Emile Zola’s famous “J’accuse...,” a discussion of the role of the intellectual necessarily raises the issue of the relationship between the sphere of cultural production and the sphere political practice. That the boundaries between these two spheres are problematic and porous can easily be granted and yet it seems equally uncontentious that the conceptual tension that the cultural and the political put in play retains, at least for the moment, a heuristic validity. In any event, it is well beyond the scope of this project to attempt a reformulation of such fundamental categories. Rather, and more modestly, we see the contributions contained in this volume as participating in a mapping out of some important intersections of cultural and political theories and practices in contemporary Italy. In particular, we would like to expose and shed some light on the difficulties, hindrances, and frustrations, but also the possibilities which emerge at these sites of intersection: the crisis of the

cultural and the crisis of the political seem to us inherently related, though the connecting links are increasingly difficult to follow in the nearly overwhelming tangle of relations which constitute complex contemporary societies. And yet, amid all of these complexities, a few experiences stand out in sharp relief and point to significant shifts that have taken place in the political and cultural spheres over the last few decades. At this juncture, I would merely like to identify a few of these critical shifts, which will then be elaborated in the main body of this work.

In cultural terms, while the post-World War II period was characterized by a Gramscian-style battle for cultural dominance and eventually hegemony, from the 1980s onward, and with an accelerating pace since 1989, Italy has been witnessing nothing less than a war on culture, i.e., a concerted and systematic pressure on all cultural institutions, activities and products to force them into the service of market economy and consumerism. Italy's "neo-television" is the paradigmatic case and raises the issue of what space is left for the intellectual to challenge the relentless media chatter that anaesthetizes public opinion. Carving out spaces of resistance in the face of such an onslaught requires a radical rethinking of how, where and when to intervene, and of strategic deployments of voice, image and body which force us to rethink from the foundations what being an intellectual today could possibly mean.

In terms of the political, the post-war struggle for reforms and a capitalism with a human face, which could be considered a necessary stage on the way to socialism, was gradually replaced from the 1980s onward by a battle of the brands within an ever-widening swamp of substantial ideological consensus: politics is reduced to administration by the section of the ruling élite with the best PR department and the savviest spin doctors. The question is no longer, as in the 1950s and 60s, whether and to what extent the (organic) intellectual should accept party discipline, nor, as in the 1970s, can the intellectual speak for those whom the system marginalizes – long dead are the parties which could command the intellectual's allegiance, while few still believe that a society without marginalization is possible or even desirable. Rather, the question today is whether there is anyone willing to listen to an opinion different from one's own: is there any room for dialogue, rather than the rigidly orchestrated and thus sterile confrontations which pass for argument not only on Italy's garbage TV but also in the increasingly conformist and narrow-minded national press. There aren't any longer any institutional settings for real political debate and therefore Italian intellectuals have to reinvent spaces and occasions for a counter-politics of thought and substance against the mere administration of a criminally destructive and unstable status quo. In

sum, Italy today provides a stunning example of the fulfilment of the darkest intimations of twentieth century Western philosophy: the degeneration, indeed the virtual disappearance, of the public sphere (Habermas), the triumph of the most banal instrumental rationality (Adorno and Horkheimer), the flattening out of language (Marcuse), the elimination of reality (Baudrillard) and the triumph of the spectacle (Debord). Postmodernism may be over (Luperini), but its liquidation certainly did not mark the end of the condition of postmodernity and the radical challenges which that condition poses to modernity and the enlightenment project. To those challenges postmodernism could provide no answer but a return to the old pieties is foreclosed by the realities of the present conjuncture. In the 1960s Jean Paul Sartre called for the suicide of the intellectual, forty years later we might better understand that call as an attempt to definitively exorcise an old, venerable and obsolete social figure of authority and knowledge, and clear the ground for different theories and practices at the intersection of culture and politics.

Cast in the Crucible: The Intellectual and Utopia

An effective rethinking of the role of the intellectual must be based on a solid understanding of our present condition as intellectuals. Such an understanding can be developed by reflecting first and foremost on what intellectuals actually do, on the material conditions which frame their activities and to which their actions necessarily respond. This starting point has led some of us to focus on the much neglected issue of institutions. This may seem paradoxical: in the previous section, it has been argued that traditional cultural and political institutions are under attack and that there is virtually no space in which the intellectual may intervene. And now, it is argued that the lives of intellectuals are profoundly affected by the institutions in which they nonetheless live. But this is not a contradiction, rather it is a paradox: the institutions which traditionally played a central role in the production and reproduction of intellectuals (e.g., the universities, state bureaucracies, political organizations, the publishing industry, to name a few) are now increasingly committed to (re)producing forms of life which are deeply inimical to the capacity for critical thought which is the *conditio sine qua non* for the emergence of an intellectual, however conceived. The institutions can linger on, even grow, but their function changes fundamentally, though conflicts and tensions also survive within these settings. On the other hand, technological developments and the much noted centrality of intellectual labour in late capitalism create the potential for the development of new sites for the

(re)production of intellectuals capable of creative and critical thinking. The pressure of market-driven rationality is just as strong at these new sites as everywhere else in the system and yet here it tends to be more directly experienced as an imposition, as a constraint on the free flow of information, ultimately as an irrational cost (e.g., copyright vs. copyleft; open source programs). Today's intellectuals, then, find themselves cast in the crucible of the contemporary time-space compression: traditional institutions, though still necessary for survival, become inhospitable to critical thought and require a constant refashioning of the skills, goals and values that are necessary to succeed in the competitive marketplace of knowledge; on the other hand, potential new sites for autonomous creativity and thought appear occasional and ephemeral, incapable of sustaining long term commitments, or elaborating complex aspirations. In this context, the story of the contemporary Italian intellectual could not but be, it would seem, one of disorientation, confusion, frustration. And yet, while public statements by Italian intellectuals certainly confirm this story, there is also much energy in the intellectual life of the country, especially when one considers the wide-based vitality of Italian contemporary cultural production. After the dismal 1980s, Italian literature and film have made a significant comeback not only within the country but also internationally, even though the national critical establishment has been slow in responding to these new stimuli. Another paradox: Italy is a country whose intellectuals increasingly express a wide-spread pessimism about the possibility of meaningful intervention, but also a country whose authors, writers, directors, and artists succeed in producing a wide range of stimulating work. It is our hope that by reflecting on the latter phenomena, a contribution can be made to the forging of a new and more vibrant role for intellectuals out of the crucible of the present in Italy and elsewhere.

The Structure of the Book

The organization of this volume reflects the range of preoccupations and tensions which the editors and the contributors have brought to the discussions. In the first part, we present articles reflecting on the role played writers who came into prominence in the immediate post-World War II period and who deeply marked Italian cultural life in the second half of the twentieth century. The trajectory of this generation carries us from the years of commitment to the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War, via the neo-avant-garde of the 1960s, the political radicalism of the 1970s and the reaction against ideology and politics in the 1980s. In the second part, we canvass some of the most novel and

innovative voices which have emerged on the Italian cultural scene since in the 1990s. It is in this section that the vitality of the contemporary literary scene becomes apparent, generating a sharp contrast with the stagnant political and social reality of Italy today. The third part of the book provides a comparative perspective with articles that examine the debate on the role of the intellectual in other Western countries. These discussions contribute an essential international context which must be taken into account to appreciate the originality of the Italian debates. Finally, in the last section of the volume, we group contributions that do not fit under any of the previous headings but rather cut transversally across them. This section makes explicit some of the unresolved tensions within this work, and points to avenues for further research

THE HISTORICAL FRAMEWORK

RITA GAGLIANO

The Italian tradition has mostly tended to associate the role of the “intellectual” with that of the “man of letters,” and therefore also ideologically with that of the “humanist” and the “clerk/cleric.” The debates that have been conducted in Italy since World War II were and are still deeply influenced by this heritage, and our book also reflects this bias. In the context of the developing rhetoric regarding the role and function of the intellectual, we must first briefly introduce the contributions of two important figures, Benedetto Croce and Antonio Gramsci, whose respective work in the field of Italian intellectual history has been both influential and normative particularly for the left-leaning intelligentsia in the post-war context. The respective works of Croce and Gramsci play an important role in the first phase of institution-and nation-building, restating the leadership role of the intellectual class – separate and better equipped to strategize cultural change, or to safeguard national and local traditions – an idea that in reality dates back to the “*Questione della lingua*.” While at a first look the respective works of these two Italian thinkers seem diametrically opposed – the first being identified with a neo-Hegelian trend, the second as the foremost proponent of a Marxist approach to culture – we must note a few important points of convergence key to the postwar debate regarding the intellectual and its role within the public sphere.

Key to both thinkers is the primacy of the world of ideas over blunt historical necessity, in particular the individual’s place in history and the decisive function of ideas in shaping his/her immediate environment. In this respect, and at different times, both move away from Marxist determinism and European historical positivism, in favor of the reintroduction of a humanistic framework. Both are fascinated by the idea of the intellectual as autonomous entity, but as we shall see Gramsci sees limits in this configuration adding a psychological outlook to explain its interactions within civic society. While in Croce the enlightenment idea of autonomy of the subject informs his view of the intellectuals, his insistence that their work remain relegated to the field of aesthetics and

forever separate from the political implicitly reveals the limits of said autonomy. Always a careful reader of Croce, Gramsci sees in this unresolved ambiguity a point of departure from his predecessor. Instead, by affirming their contingent status as spokespersons for an entire social group, intellectuals as theorized by Gramsci may function as agents of social change.¹

While the idea of the intellectual as a crucial player in the historical process is essential for both, what differs in each is their respective theorization of the cultural field and just how the intellectual moves within it; while for Croce ideas are a true force of change insofar as they may provide as ethical models, for Gramsci the actions that those ideas may inspire can truly revolutionize one's perception of reality. What differentiates the two is the relationship the intellectual may or may not have with the field of the political. The intellectual as theorized by Croce is forever engaged in history able to distill the spirit of the times – a self-conscious realization of the human spirit that may inspire future generations.² This is a specialized knowledge more akin to aesthetics than to science but most importantly one that subordinates the material world of politics and economics to that of ideas.³ In no way the work of the

¹ In his *Quaderni del Carcere* (henceforth QC) Gramsci's analysis of the "cosmopolitan" nature of Italian intellectuals, given both the long history of foreign domination and the use of Latin by both "clerks/clerics" and the secular intellectuals of courts and (city-) states as a means of communication and cultural diffusion that occurred outside and beyond the more limited regional and proto-national social intercourse of classes was historically quite persuasive. But the strong Hegelian and Crocean influence in his thought meant that theoretical proposals to challenge this history were not as close as he thought to the Leninist model he thought he was emulating. In reality, Gramsci's distinction between organic and cosmopolitan intellectuals is one based on a value judgment as to their respective ideological loyalties, the first to their class of belonging, the latter to hegemonic power; the first capable of revolutionary acts, the second to be found guilty of mystification. Gramsci believes that in crucial moments in history (renaissance, Risorgimento, fascism) intellectuals have remained apart and separate from the interests of the people and in defense of the ruling class, driven as they are by aesthetic and political rather than ethical imperatives (QC 1559).

² His specific vision of the role of the intellectual idealism tempered by Materialism, particularly in his *Theory and History of Historiography*, sees the work of the intellectual as drawing from its contingent historical moment in the process of articulating the higher value of human experience. However, this value is not transcendent as in Hegel; his refusal of metaphysics must be seen as a univocal rejection of totalitarianism be it cultural or political.

³ Croce's liberal positivism is essentially of humanistic vocation which informs his

intellectual should cross paths with that of the politician so as to safeguard what Croce conceives as an objective, impartial pursuit thus rejecting the definition of intellectual engagement postulated by fascist ideologue and one-time-friend Giovanni Gentile in his *Manifesto of the Fascist Intellectual*.⁴ Instead, Gramsci affirms the primacy of ideology above all other human pursuits, a dominion based on the theorized convergence of three specific fields of knowledge: philosophy, politics and history.⁵ While Gramsci accepts Croce's humanistic premise of the superior role played by the intellectual in the cultural field, he moves beyond the former somewhat utopian perspective by juxtaposing a Marxist framework. In agreement with Croce as to the immanence of the world of ideas, but seeing the limitations of his bourgeois idealism⁶, Gramsci vies for a type of cultural analysis grounded in history and supported by ideology, capable of mobilizing and empowering specific social groups that may otherwise remain subjugated by hegemonic powers.⁷ He defines intellectuals by their socio-political role and their reliance on a specific social context, beginning with class identification. Thus, in his mind there is no

specific idealization of the concept of history: History and not nature is the true habitat of man; a category more akin to aesthetics than science. It is a string of individual acts and events by which humanity seeks to self-consciously give meaning to its own environment and give rise to a spiritual world. However, history never rises to the status of a metaphysics of human action, insofar as every facet of human life can't be reduced to a function of a single autonomous process, thus the work of historiography can only be useful as inspiration to acts of moral and spiritual elevation. Benedetto Croce, *Storiografia e identità morale* (Bari: Laterza, 1950) 153.

⁴ Croce, Benedetto. *Manifesto degli intellettuali antifascisti*. 1925.

<http://criticaliberale.it/>

⁵ Unlike Croce, Gramsci sees a link between philosophy, politics and history by way of ideology; a philosopher who holds "a critical coherent concept of the world" also has a consciousness of its historicity" (QC 1376). The work of the philosopher can and should lead to collective action and ultimately to social change (QC 1255) since "each philosophy is a politics each philosopher a political man" (QC 1925); "Only a true practitioner of this tripartite knowledge can truly know history and its laws and thus be capable to reveal a definitive conception of the world that is both coherent and scientific" (QC 1505)

⁶ "The political element feels but does not always understand or know. The intellectual element knows but does not always understand and, especially, does not always feel (QC 1505).

⁷ For Gramsci man is not ruled by force alone but also by ideas; political leadership finds its source in a consensus produced by the diffusion of specific worldview(s) by the ruling class. This, in short, is what Gramsci means by Hegemony.

autonomous class of intellectuals as stipulated by Croce. In Gramsci the fields of philosophy and politics coincide, enabling the work of the intellectual to seamlessly move from theory to praxis, thus affecting the field of the social, and potentially revealing and/or solving social conflict. Nevertheless, in keeping with Croce's idea of the spirit of the times, Gramsci argues that progressive classes' particular and spontaneous influence may lead to revolutionary action through their ability to modify the perception of social reality through their ideological pursuit and thus mediating a critical consciousness.⁸ Thus the work of Gramsci's 'organic' intellectual acquires a psychological and gnoseological validity, and is ultimately distinguished by a preferential relationship to power.⁹

The concept of the intellectual as specialist in the field of ideas and mediator of socially critical knowledge shared by both Croce and Gramsci, becomes the culturally dominant paradigm during the period of post-war reconstruction.¹⁰ Croce and Gramsci become emblematic figures in the post-war reevaluation of the role of the intellectual enacted by the center-left intelligentsia, in its attempt to retrospectively establish a genealogy of anti-fascist commitment in Italy. In particular, Benedetto Croce's stance against the fascist regime becomes a symbolic precursor to an overt anti-fascist position preceding the brief period of armed resistance at the end of the war.¹¹ This re-contextualization offers a 'safe model' of anti-fascist

⁸ For both Croce and Gramsci the role of the intellectual is that of facilitating critical consciousness which is lacking in the masses, by their ability to modify human percept of a specific social reality. In so far as the intellectual is the reader/interpreter of the experience of its own social group, his/her work transcends "primitive common sense."

⁹ One of the most important aspects of Gramsci's analysis, which focused attention on the divide between elite and popular culture, is also weakened because it does not really relate their existence, history and development to the productive process; it also does not analyze the forms of interaction and mutual influence between these "cultures," to the extent they can actually be viewed as separate. The Gramscian notion of the organic intellectual, as mediator of a worldview that legitimizes the very ideological precepts of his party of affiliation, is tied to an outdated notion of power. Moreover, the sectorialization of the intellectual worlds is not a simple effect of a cultural diversification brought on by the expansion of culture.

¹⁰ As David Forgacs notes: "Many of the PCI's most prominent theoretical cadres had been 'left-Croceans' under Fascism who would produce what was to become in the late forties and early fifties a characteristically Italian cross-fertilisation between idealist and Marxist thought" – *Italian Culture in the Industrial Era 1880-1980* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1990) 158.

¹¹ A position shared by Gramsci himself who in his notebooks speaks of Croce's

engagement divorced from Marxism that would prove particularly useful during the ideological tensions characterizing the period of the cold war.¹² At the same time, Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*, and their exegesis by intellectuals affiliated with the PCI had an enormous influence on the interpretation of previous political and intellectual history. Within this context, this revival and valorization of Gramsci's work provides an ideological framework that reaffirms the elite role of intellectuals as exclusive and privileged producers and estimators of culture¹³ while extending the sphere of said enterprise from the ethical field of human activity as postulated by Croce, to that of the political—an idea of the political that now extends to all aspects of social production. However, ultimately this problematic conceptualization of the role of the intellectual even in Gramsci's reading of Marxist thought distances the work of the intellectual from other social processes by elevating it above all others.

The Croce-Gramsci line, its evident humanistic derivation, and its outright rejection of the deterministic perspective of a strictly mechanistic Marxism would condition the way the debate on the intellectual would take shape in years to come. This anti-scientific and anti-materialistic strain, that also characterized Italian intellectual culture during fascism, remains normative even within later incarnations of said intellectual debate. This anti-scientist trend, institutionalized by Gentile's great school reform under fascism, and fostered by the outright rejection of positivism by turn of the century intellectuals such as Croce and Gramsci will lead to the relative cultural marginalization of Italy in the 20th century. This is not to say that in the context of the Italian cultural debate on the intellectual, the work of materialist philosophers of the likes of Galvano Della Volpe

strength of character in turbulent historical times (Q1216).

¹² Croce's influence over the whole area of the humanities in early twentieth century Italy was exceptional, wholly without parallel in Britain or the United States. After Croce's death in 1952 his influence sustained its momentum through a generation of scholars who had grown up in his shadow, but it also began to work indirectly through Antonio Gramsci, whose posthumously published writings in turn exercised a strong influence during the first two post-war decades, particularly in historiography, social anthropology and literary criticism. in Pol & Cult (100-20, 211-68) intellectual historian Norberto Bobbio points out that Croce's Hegel inspired Neo-positivism (reactionary idealism) and his rejection of any form of scientism including the social theory intrinsic to Marx, ultimately prevented Italian intellectuals from truly dealing with mass culture and industrial society. See also Pietro Rossi, *Storia e storicismo nella filosofia contemporanea* (Milano: Il Saggiatore, 1991) 287.

¹³ Forgacs also warns against the high culture bias of the the Croce-Gramsci line.

and Sebastiano Timpanaro have not left a lasting contribution. On the contrary, by providing a minority report of sorts, they have successfully offered an alternative to a dominant somewhat narrowly humanistic ideological framework. The anti-hegelian Della Volpe, fringe philosopher initially boycotted by the Italian academia for his stern defense of an unpopular scientific Marxism, gained some attention in the late 1950s and early 1960s for his opposition to Gramscian historicism, however made headway within the Italian intelligentsi¹⁴ Another materialist interpretation of Marxian thought was to emerge later with Sebastiano Timpanaro, but it did not achieve Della Volpe's broad social or institutional effects. Classical philologist and Marxist active in the Socialist party, Timpanaro overtly criticized Croce's aversion to science and scientism that also dominated the Italian intellectual scene, which he viewed as alarmingly linked to the reactionary anti-scientism and anti-modernism so intrinsic to Italian fascism.¹⁵ Instead, he saw the ethical value of science and materialism as the harbingers of truth capable to bypass the gnoseological impasse of the idealism infused Italian historical Marxism.

The present study begins where the ideological framework of historicism starts to break down, where its language begins to erode. Historically, at the start of the twentieth century industrialization is still localized, influencing only the more affluent and politically powerful regions. Italy's late entry into the modern world noticeably postpones the social mutations and the critique of modernity that ensues throughout Europe as a result of these radical changes.¹⁶ Our point of departure is the

¹⁴ Della Volpe was instrumental in bringing Raniero Panzieri to teach philosophy of law alongside him at the University of Messina. Panzieri in his turn was one of the founders of the journal *Quaderni rossi*, which saw the origin of many of the ideas which became influential in the 1960's and others that coalesced into the movement known as *operaismo*. One of the most independent and influential intellectuals on the Italian left in the last half of the 20th century, Franco Fortini, was also involved with Panzieri at this time.

¹⁵ Timpanaro, Sebastiano Jr. "Scienza e filosofia: "L'Arduo" (1914, 1921-23)" in *Tradizione e dissenso nelle riviste del primo 900*, ed. Marco Quaranta (Padova: Ediziono Sapere, 1994).

¹⁶ The radical changes brought forth by a rapid evolving economic and social setting resulted in fact in an awakening of a new consciousness of crisis that would characterize this entire century. Thinkers such as Sigmund Freud, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Karl Marx, just to name a few, had already theorized a social critique of industrialism at the end of the nineteenth century. The cultural debate that followed did not reach the Italian intellectual milieu with full force because of the country's different economic concerns and as for example in the case of Freud,

uneven but ultimately inexorable collapse of the ideal of commitment and of the Gramscian project – rather self-servingly promoted by the PCI – particularly after the crisis of 1956-57 which traditional scholarship finds is the result of three major international events: the revelation of past Stalinist crimes at the XX Congress of the PCUS, the Anglo-French Suez Canal expedition, and the Soviet invasion of Hungary.¹⁷

Beginning with the 1950s Italy sets the foundations for the advancement of capitalist cultural formations while still being ideologically tied to a culture of resistance and its left-wing ideals so integral to the first stages of Italian nation-building.¹⁸ While the economic boom introduces the realities of advanced capitalism in an Italian context, the late 1950s see a weakened and delegitimized political left,¹⁹ and a government ill equipped to cushion the social changes that followed this large wave of modernization. The strict separation between humanistic and scientific pursuits already implicit in the anti-modern, humanistic scope of the cultural debates, previous to and concurrent with the constitution of the Italian Republic, gradually leads to the marginalization of the former at a time in which other specialist languages of science, technology, and communication begin to dominate. Significantly, the Gramscian historical Marxism which dominates the Italian intellectual scene after the war by retaining Croce's cultural hierarchies, and by privileging high culture over

the translations were late in coming; Norberto Bobbio, *Ideological Profile of 20th Century Italy*, tran. Lydia Cochrane (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1995) 9-24.

¹⁷ While the historical perspective is certainly more complex than to reduce this crisis to three singular events this is not to say that the aforementioned historical events, arbitrary as they may be, are nevertheless signs, or perhaps symptoms, of broader forces at play.

¹⁸ This tension characterizing the country continues even in the next decades, the growing grass-roots anti-parliamentary groups still in great part influenced by Marxist ideals diverge from an increasingly de-radicalized leftist intelligentsia, and no longer identify with a de-Stalinized and waning Italian Communist Party (PCI).

¹⁹ For the politically organized left, but especially the PCI, the latter half of the '50's was troubling on many fronts. Khrushchev's revelations at the XX Congress of the PCUS about the Stalin era, and the subsequent Soviet invasion of Hungary and crackdown in Poland significantly damaged the PCI's attempts at cultural hegemony in civil society, not to speak of the questions it raised about the sincerity of such concepts as internationalism, solidarity and so forth. To some extent the impact of these events can also be seen on the changes that occurred in the world of some the most influential journals of the post-war period. *Ragionamenti* ceased publication around this time; *Il Contemporaneo* became a monthly in 1958; *Società* changes the type of editorial board that used to run it.

mass and scientific cultures is much less capable of addressing the aforementioned social mutations and the critique of modernity. This leads to the inability by many intellectuals to adapt to or actively engage these new spheres of influence and power, ever more closed in their defensive, reactionary stances. Even after the great socio-economic developments of the economic miracle²⁰, the beginning of student revolts, and the advent of structural linguistics and semiotics, the primacy of the intellectual as producer of specialized symbolic strategies that mediate reality remains untouched. Both Umberto Eco and Italo Calvino, foremost proponents of a new generation of Italian intellectuals more sensitive to the socio-economic and cultural mutations of their native country as well as open to these new aforementioned disciplines, in spite of said understanding continue to purport – whether overtly or implicitly – the conceptualization of the intellectual still faithful to the Croce-Gramsci line, as an actor of social change through cultural critique.

By the 1960s Italian Marxist theorists begin to abandon strict historicism and focus towards the present, at the same time contemporary intellectuals, particularly those tied to the neovanguard begin to criticize the dominance of ideology within cultural production and its tendency to perpetrate a specific world view, aiming instead toward the search for new forms and a new vocabulary that may find a way around the impasse they saw in the neorealist mystification of the real, so ideologically tied to the left wing intelligentsia of the PCI.²¹ This new fetishism of the new as an answer to the dominance of naturalistic representation in literature and film intended to question the very correspondence between representation and meaning implicit in this narrative strategy. The work of the neovanguard is an important moment in the crisis of representational language in an Italian context particularly for the wide theorization that accompanies their work. They represent a new generation of intellectuals, more influenced by French post-structuralism and by the changes brought on by the economic miracle, than by the traumatic events of the second world conflict. Their fundamentalism of the new, geared towards the dismantling of the old epistemological biases begins to disintegrate that

²⁰ Internally the economic boom meant that a greater percentage of the population was now employed and started being oriented towards Western/US forms of private consumption. The phenomena of internal migration created tensions and contradictions for which the PCI was not always prepared. And then in 1956 events on the international front had what in retrospect can be seen as a very significant impact on the party as “collective intellectual.”

²¹ See Rita Gagliano “Of Miracles and Catastrophes: The New Avant-garde at the Dawn of the Economic Boom,” *Italica* 84.2 & 3 (2007): 247-61.

historical continuity in support of artistic tradition. Driven by the materialistic intuition that the institutional transmission of culture inevitably modifies the message it aims to communicate, they offer a newly envisioned relationship between cultural production and economic base, one in which the former can be acted upon by contiguous forces and interests. At the same time they successfully debunk the definition of the intellectual that dominated the Italian debate, by revealing to what extent such a figure is embedded within a broader symbolic network that includes political and economic interests. They are the first in Italy to implicitly point out to what extent the liberal-democratic impetus to refashion Italy into a democratic republic quickly becomes second place to a political culture²² not focused on resolution of conflict but on representational authority of one ideology over another, revealing one worldview over another, and to show to what extent political culture, one tending towards dogmatism and domination, becomes a form of containment for all changes that may threaten the status quo.

While the work of the neovanguard did not have a widespread effect on social practices and cultural production in a larger sense – perhaps due to its ambivalence towards low and middlebrow cultural production, at once appropriated and refashioned into works of art that defy easy enjoyment or representation – they certainly can be seen as the precursors of the type of debate that would characterize the late 70s and 80s, a time in which the heightened pace of change sets off the inability to critically view the present and further exacerbates this crisis of historicism. This is a crisis symptomatic of greater sweeping changes within Italian society and specifically the containment of left-wing politics and the ideas they stood to represent. In a strictly political sense, the brief and provisional presence of the PCI in a majority coalition ends in 1979, when the Christian Democratic Party (DC) first allies with the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) under the leadership of Bettino Craxi (PSI, 1983-1987) that would later lead to the creation of a five-party coalition (1987-1992). All of this ultimately relegates the PCI to the opposition, further destabilizing the cultural influence of the party and its ideologues, even of that idea of intellectual commitment that had been so central to the first decades of the young Italian Republic.²³ In addition, in a more immediate sense, the Aldo Moro kidnapping and subsequent murder at the hands of the Red

²² Whether it be fascism, marxism, or catholicism.

²³ This *Pentapartito*, as this coalition would be called, allows the DC to effectively reach a comfortable majority vote by allying with other minority parties (PSI, PSDI, PRI, PLI) successfully debunking the PCI to its original position of opposition.

Brigades (March 16, 1978), and the fall of the Berlin Wall (Nov 9, 1989) seem to intimate the conclusion of strong and proactive left-wing ideologies. While the horrors of terrorism mark the disappointment of those oppositional Marxist ideas within Italy, the fall of the Berlin Wall ushers the 'official' end of the cold war, a fundamental shift in the global political and economic re-organization of greater proportions. After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent crisis of communist regimes, members of the EEC sign the Treaty of Maastricht (1992), effectively bringing about the creation of the EU and of a single European market with a single currency to be realized by 1999.

At the same time in Italy we see a number of equally significant watershed moments signaling the beginning of a new era in national politics. At the beginning of the 1990s the breakdown of the old party system resulting from the *Tangentopoli* scandal and the subsequent *Clean Hands* inquiry²⁴ further destabilizes the political left and its ideological framework by revealing the web of corruption behind a seemingly ideologically driven politics all of which would ultimately lead to the creation of the Second Republic.²⁵ Taking advantage of a new wave of Italian mistrust toward the political class, noted and much discussed media mogul Silvio Berlusconi enters the political arena under the banner of a newly created center-right party *Forza Italia*. After a first brief victory in 1994²⁶, and in spite of the evident and unconstitutional conflict of interest intrinsic in his double role of entrepreneur and politician,²⁷ Berlusconi

²⁴ Conducted by the Milan Attorney's office in 1992, this inquiry reveals an intricate web of political corruption and implicates many of the leaders of the *Pentapartito*, politicians of great popularity and repute such as Giulio Andreotti, Arnaldo Forlani, Ciriaco De Mita, Paolo Cirino Pomicino (DC), Bettino Craxi (PSI), Renato Altissimo, Francesco De Lorenzo (PLI), Giorgio La Malfa (PRI).

²⁵ This term is by no means a technical one, but one adopted by the media to refer to the Italian state after the – mostly electoral – reforms induced by *Tangentopoli*, and by the increasing transparency of the dysfunctions and the deficiencies of an entire system. While some mark the cut off between First and Second Republic with the beginning of the *Tangentopoli* scandal (1992), others place this temporal demarcation to 1994 when the new majority electoral laws, the new party system come into effect, and thus the disappearance of old parliamentary alliances.

²⁶ Due to the breakdown of an alliance with Umberto Bossi and his Lega Nord, which will then follows the first left-wing government headed by Romano Prodi.

²⁷ The richest man in Italy, Berlusconi owns Italy's three largest private television stations (Canale 5, Rete 4, Italia 1) which account for approximately half the national viewing audience, three nationally distributed dailies *Il Giornale* (directed by his brother Paolo), *Libero*, and *Il Foglio* (owned by his wife), one of the largest publishing houses in the Italian market (among them *Mondadori*, *Einaudi*, *Sperling*

continues his keen participation in Italian politics leading to his re-elected in 2001, and in 2008, after a short-lived and much maligned left-wing government headed by Romano Prodi. The debate on Berlusconi's undeniable yet in appearance acceptable conflict of interest – created by his continued refusal to give up control of his many holdings – remains unresolved and by the second Berlusconi government becomes a mute point treated as a *fait accompli*.²⁸ No longer motivated by specific principles and issues historically tied to singular parties, Italian politics from the time of Berlusconi becomes 'personalized,' driven by the charisma and the image of individual leaders; a spectacularization that broadens the divide between the political class and an already disenchanted and increasingly disenfranchised civic society. With the collapse of strong ideologies, the tie between theory and practice, so close to the Gramscian theorization of intellectual labor, becomes ever more partial and fragmentary, and the very idea of political or ideological commitment is increasingly viewed as an impossibility within and outside the political stage.

How do these broad sweeping changes affect the debate on the intellectual in Italy, and in other parts of the world? The emergence of new forms of social, political and economic arrangement does not merely change the discourse on intellectual engagement which permeates contemporary Italian culture, it mutates the relationship between intellectuals and power. The economic and technological advances characterizing the last decades of the 20th century, mark the movement from a centralized power, ultimate expression of paternalistic rule, to a decentralized, ubiquitous and therefore elusive power of a larger capitalist network no longer identifiable with any one single institution or corporation. At the same time, the general state of malaise of the Italian intellectuals has certainly been affected by the simple fact that Silvio Berlusconi (the man who is at the helm of the Italian government)

& Kupfer, Frasinelli), the largest film distributors (*Medusa* and *Penta*), the leading Italian advertising and publicity agency (*Publital*), and a variety of other activities. A debate ensued between those that see in Berlusconi a successful entrepreneur driven by a patriotic desire to serve is country and those who instead believe him to be motivated by personal interest.

²⁸ This initial complacency by both media and government would pose little resistance to Berlusconi's abuses of power while in office. The Italian PM would create a number of *ad personam* laws which would effectively allow him to circumvent ten pending trials related to his private business ventures spanning the gamut of corporate crimes from false accounting to the corruption of judges, embezzlement and tax fraud.

currently controls (a) the legislative power of the country, which he consistently uses to limit judicial power with new legislation; (b) the largest viewing public, that of commercial television; and (c) the principal publishing houses, including Einaudi which has had a determining role in the establishment and solidification of Italian culture. As intellectuals feel increasingly disconnected from the power and/or ideologies that once appeared to more unproblematically legitimize their role, the machinery of this new populist society of the spectacle, aided by but not shaped by the increasing popularity of television, replaces their role of cultural mediators.²⁹ This crisis is felt most in the ranks of those critics who held firm to their role of disinterested connoisseur of culture and custodian of an established order. Those that instead ride the wave of this transformation attempting to overcome the devaluation of their role of mediators, must find a new place in the expanding space of culture by becoming a 'operators' of sorts. In this bright new world in which the publishing industry, more overtly reveals its kinship with all other fields of cultural productions both middlebrow and lowbrow by more directly satisfying and shaping consumer demands, it becomes clear that the dictates of the intellectuals must too transform. Having lost that preferential relationship to culture that Gramsci or Croce had theorized, intellectuals find new forms of self-legitimation and self-determination by becoming *trend-setters*, *opinion-makers*, and *cultural entrepreneurs*, often crossing over from the pages of the written word into the world of television.³⁰

This reframing of the function of the intellectual as expert with

²⁹ In Italy until the early 1970s television had been a conservative educational tool of mass indoctrination in the hands of the most powerful parties. To this day seven of the nine members of the Administrative Council directing this public agency are elected by parliamentary committee, splitting the control of the public channels along ideological lines. With the establishment of commercial broadcast channels, further aided by the deregulation of television broadcasting policy, TV gives more space to the superficial hedonism of a more overt consumer culture. Receiving great support from Berlusconi's *Fininvest* group and other such media holdings, ordinance 20.10.1984 – which becomes law on February 1985 – allows private broadcasters to broaden their reach beyond local and regional markets, effectively bringing about the deregulation of RAI's television monopoly. Television becomes a more widespread medium invading areas of culture traditionally exclusively open to print. Instead of bringing a greater social transparency, the expansion of television explodes reality into a multitude of representations and simulations that distract and amuse rather than inform.

³⁰ For a catalog of terms see Carla Benedetti *Il tradimento dei critici*. Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2002.

acquired skills and knowledge is accompanied by a new anxiety, a sense of loss of 'Beruf,' or professional authority, on the part of many intellectuals, and ultimately their growing disconnect with the means of cultural production. Intellectuals today have lost that certainty in their ethical and gnoseological function, so central to Croce and Gramsci. This increased ideological uncertainty and the final repudiation of the ideal of the organic intellectual finds its philosophical counterpart in the hermeneutic relativism of Gianni Vattimo's *weak thought*.³¹ For the Italian philosopher, the present dissolution of all totalizing philosophies is the ultimate point in the ongoing process of secularization that no longer permits 'strong' metaphysical or even gnoseological aspirations.³² Vattimo's philosophical breakthrough shows a growing awareness of an epochal change affecting all regions of knowledge and human activity, in the latter part of the 20th century, identified with the Modern-Postmodern debate.³³ While it is not the purpose of this introduction to come to a definitive assessment of the term in a general sense or the debate tied to it, it is important to note that the late articulation of the question of postmodernism in Italy, coincides with, and fuels, the millennial anxieties that characterize the Italian critical discourse at the end of the century.

One last global watershed moment that must be tallied in, before ending our brief overview of significant events of the recent past, is the terrorist attack on New York's Twin Towers on September 11, 2001. This tragic event seen by the world as an affront to a great world power as well as a retaliatory attack against American involvement in foreign affairs of

³¹ The Italian philosopher first outlines his hermeneutic approach, and deconstructs what he sees as the ultimately nihilistic "dissolutive dialectic" intrinsic to Marxism in his article "Dialettica, differenza, pensiero debole," in AA.VV., *Il pensiero debole*, ed. Gianni Vattimo, Pier Aldo Rovatti (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1983) 12-28.

³² Like Lyotard and Jameson before him, the Italian philosopher perceives the beginnings of an epochal impasse that marks the death of teleology and the impossibility of grand-narratives. This specific new condition requires a 'soft' nihilism receptive to the complexities of contemporary life, a relational hermeneutic that allows the philosopher to identify new parameters of judgment functional at the local level without ever crossing the threshold of the metaphysical.

³³ Such an awareness is present in the works of Umberto Eco and Gianni Vattimo as early as the 1970s, however the persistent parochialism of the Italian intellectual arena leads to a general resistance to the terms "postmodernism" in favor of the more familiar *neo-barocco* and *transavanguardia*. For a complete study of the complexities of the postmodern debate and its local formations within an Italian context see Monica Jensen, *Il dibattito sul postmoderno in Itali: In bilico tra dialettica e ambiguità* (Firenze: Cesati, 2002).