The role of displacement in the renewal of European philosophy cannot be stressed enough. After its manifest decline in the 1930s and 1940s, European philosophy migrated outside its traditional disciplinary boundaries, in a movement of displacement that continues to this day. The first geographical displacement coincided with the forced exile of some of the greatest European thinkers to the United States, and it soon translated into a conceptual displacement. In the post-WWII period, European philosophy turned its back to the concept of “crisis,” which had constituted its principal paradigm in the pre-War decades. Its most illustrious examples remained the writings of Valery on the crisis of the spirit, of Husserl on the crisis of the European sciences, and of Heidegger on the crisis of the metaphysical tradition. A vast intellectual community of writers and thinkers as different as Thomas Mann and Ortega, Spengler and Benedetto Croce, had espoused the notion of crisis. Despite their differences, these thinkers were all concerned about the deadly grip in which European thought found itself, and believed that the latter should recover the proper Greek origins from which it had fatefuly strayed. Their writings of the

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1 Roberto Esposito’s essay “German Philosophy, French Theory, Italian Thought” was first published in Italian as the introduction to the volume Differenze Italiane, edited by Dario Gentili and Elettra Stimilli (Roma: DeriveApprodi, 2015). It appears here in my translation and in a somewhat abridged form. I wish to thank the author for contributing this piece to our forum. I also thank Andrew Cutrofello (Department of Philosophy, Loyola University Chicago) for his generosity in reading a draft of my translation and helping with revisions. (Mena Mitrano)
pre-WWII years, almost unfailingly and with only a few variations, link in circular fashion origin and end, arche and telos, and argue that only if it rediscovered its primeval bond to ancient Greece could European thought reclaim its hegemony over other cultures and thus fulfill the civilizing task to which it had always been destined. The key terms might change from thinker to thinker – “spirit,” “being,” “transcendental ego” – but, until the early 1940s, the great European philosophical tradition relied on one and the same dispositif of crisis.

The outcome of WWII marked the failure of the discourse of crisis. Worn out by its own search for an origin that it could not find, European thought moved outside its boundaries in the attempt to reinvent itself along other trajectories. At the onset of Nazism, the emigration to America of many German-Jewish intellectuals constituted the first dramatic enactment of this outward movement. Having left behind the regressive dispositif of crisis, European philosophy seemed revived and could assert once again its leadership worldwide. Although the early Frankfurt School thinkers are usually grouped under the label “critical theory,” it should be noted that they, especially Adorno and Marcuse, kept to a strictly philosophical lexicon. According to the project of the Institute, philosophy should combine with other disciplines – sociology, psychoanalysis, aesthetics – without imitating their procedures, but rather by infusing their languages with the theoretical dimension which was necessary to question their assumed autonomy and bind the disparate fields of inquiry into a relation of contradiction. For this reason, one might refer to the first great displacement of European thought outside its boundaries with the term “German Philosophy,” without it bearing any sort of national connotation, especially because it refers primarily to Jewish intellectuals. If one considers the great influence of Marcuse, above all, but also, to a lesser degree owing to their dealings with the student movement, of Adorno and Horkheimer, on the cultural politics of the time, it is safe to say that the passage to America gave new life to European philosophy. The novelty of this event cannot be underestimated. Perhaps for the first time in modern history, the broadening of a particular philosophy was proportional to its deterritorialization. Philosophy’s disconnect from its original geography did not lead to its disempowerment, as Heidegger and the philosophers of
the crisis had predicted; far from it, it caused a formidable expansion. As Deleuze and Guattari would later argue in their discourse of “geophilosophy,” the broadening is not a contingent but a structural trait of philosophical discourse: only if thought exceeds itself, and departs from its (assumed) matrix, can it find the resources for a profound renewal.

The 1970s, with the rise of French Theory, marked the second great displacement.

A group of French intellectuals, already quite well-known in their home country and, more generally, in Europe, because of their celebrity, were invited to lecture at American universities. Unlike the German diaspora, French Theory did not ensue from traumatic events and it was, therefore, devoid of any tragic resonance; but like the German diaspora, geographical displacement resulted in a contamination and in a circulation of ideas that took on the traits of a veritable hegemony in a number of disciplines, from literary criticism to gender studies and postcolonial studies. It is usually remarked that, once it crossed the Atlantic, the philosophy of Derrida, Deleuze, Lyotard, Foucault, and Baudrillard became quite other as decontextualized fragments of their thought amalgamated in a new discourse called “theory.” Undoubtedly, the phenomenon of hybridization that goes by the name of theory arose in response to a deeply felt need for renewal in the American university. At the same time, however, theory resulted in an extraordinary revival of French philosophy in the rest of the world: what happened in New York, Chicago, or Los Angeles resonated not only throughout the U.S. but also outside its boundaries, in Tokyo, Toronto, Buenos Aires, and Sidney. Once again, the movement outside created the conditions for an unexpected broadening of European philosophical reflection. Once again, European philosophy could reclaim a primacy that seemed to have waned. An elite of European philosophers attained the unprecedented status of celebrities, exerting their influence over a vast geographical territory through the deterritorialization or displacement of their thought vis-à-vis their places of origin.

Is it possible, after German Philosophy and French Theory, to speak of an Italian Thought? The answer could only be extremely tentative. In this case, it would be a matter neither of hegemony nor of displacement; rather, the phrase Italian Thought points to a group of Italian philosophers
who have been successful in the U.S. (and from there have extended their influence to other countries) before they could make a name for themselves at home. If an Italian theory exists, the process it suggests seems far less clear than the critical waves that have preceded it, largely because the research of those Italian philosophers who are most successful abroad develops along less traditional paths. Yet, it is undeniable that an “Italian difference” has been latent for some time and that it is now emerging, as witnessed by the growing number of conferences, books, and essays devoted to it.

Let me call attention to its name, Italian Thought, in which the word “thought” replaces “philosophy” in the phrase “German philosophy” and “theory,” in the phrase “French theory.” In my book Pensiero vivente (2010), I give the word a meaning that is performative in more than one way. It is performative in terms of the relation of theory to practice, which has always been lodged at the heart of Italian thought, to the extent that it can be grasped simultaneously as a thought of practice and a practice of thought. It is performative also in the sense of a thought that is constituted in the making, and does not issue from theoretical positions but is one with its own practice.

There seems to be an improvised quality to Italian Thought. The Frankfurt School was engendered by the program of an Institute, French Theory by complex structuralist theories. Italian Thought arose from the political dynamics of the early ’60s, which only later, if at all, flowed into the larger international student movement. Praxis preceded theory, interacting with it according to a modality of the outside attuned less to geographical displacement or the implementation of new disciplines and more to a concern for the political. The “outside” that propels Italian Thought is neither the social dimension of German Philosophy nor the textual dimension of French Theory, but the constitutively conflicting space of political practice.

Since the dawn of Italian modernity, proximity to the political has been the distinctive trait of Italian thought, connecting it to the history of the public intellectual. From early on, the lack of mediation by a centralized State has caused public intellectuals to be close to local political and ecclesiastical power, therefore in an ambivalent, and often conflicting, position toward power. Without taking this historical fact into account,
it would be difficult to understand the political fate of authors who were
exiled, like Dante (1265-1321) and Machiavelli (1469-1527); condemned
to death at the stake, like Giordano Bruno (1548-1600) and Giulio Cesare
Vanini (1585-1619); forced to forsake their principles and imprisoned,
like Galileo Galilei (1564-1642) and Tommaso Campanella (1568-1639);
or abandoned to their own death on the opposite sides of the same line,
like Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) and Giovanni Gentile (1875-1944).
If, given certain conditions, power generates resistance, this is particularly
true for philosophy. Italian philosophy is more a philosophy of resistance
than a philosophy of power. It is no coincidence that Gramsci is studied
internationally or that the workers’ struggles of the 1960s, in a variety of
strains, constitute the germinal core of Italian Thought.

Another core feature of Italian thought is its inclination to hybridize
with other paradigms. The practice of externality as the form (and
content) of thought is also a long-term feature. Italian thinkers have
traditionally incorporated philosophical lexicons from other countries. The
deterritorialization of German Philosophy was determined by necessity,
that of French Theory by demand; the deterritorialization of Italian
Thought comes with a native preference for hybridization which can be
traced back to the Renaissance and has, in fact, flowed both ways, from
Italy toward the outside and from the outside toward Italy, according to a
modality that was typical of all of European culture between the 15th and
16th centuries.

Apart from its performative vocation and its preference for incorporation,
a salient trait of Italian Thought is its central concept, especially the
peculiar modality with which it is assumed. If sociocultural change was the
central idea of the Frankfurt School and writing the central idea of French
defconstruction, Italian Thought assumes the notion of life as its own semantic
horizon. Here, one may think of Foucault and biopolitics, and, certainly, the
fact that Foucault’s pioneering research has attracted in Italy an interest that
remains unequalled elsewhere in itself deserves further investigation. But the
category of life happens to have been a traditional interest of Italian Thought,
from Leonardo (1452-1519) to Machiavelli (1469-1527) and Giordano
Bruno (1548-1600). For this reason, in Italy, there has never been the need
for a specific philosophy of life of the kind that spread in Germany or France
in the early twentieth-century. It could be argued that Italian thought has always been a thought about life, one articulated in relation to the tension between politics and history. Italian thought has not been a philosophy of consciousness, like classical French thought, nor a metaphysics, like German thought, but neither has it been a philosophy of logic and language, like the Anglophone tradition. Less an analytics of interiority, of transcendence, of logical and linguistic structures, it has developed as a knowledge about life, about the body, about the world.

A comparison with German Philosophy and French Theory will reveal the characteristic inflection of Italian Thought. The typical modality of the Frankfurt School was negativity. Adorno’s Negative Dialectics was, at the same time, the avant-garde of German philosophy and its interpretation. Adorno responded to the theological dispositif of crisis by opposing Hegel’s dialectic. He worked out a radically negative position that contrasted the master’s willingness to entrap negativity and force it to a resolution. Instead, comparing negation only to itself, Adorno transformed it into the form and content of the concept, foreclosing any kind of resolution. In a different way, Horkheimer reached the same conclusion. For Horkheimer, the critical power of the negative is so strong that it turns against the same theory that activates it, negating any affirmative outcome. With the Frankfurt thinkers the struggle of the concept against itself became so inexorable that it led to self-contradiction. Adorno did not passively accept this consequence but theorized it as the sole option for philosophy after Auschwitz. Negativity is inseparable from the sense of a theoretical paralysis, one that is not possible to overcome.

As for French Theory, its core category was the Neutral. Blanchot famously used it for the first time while Derrida and Foucault revived it in different ways that nevertheless explicitly gestured toward a thought of the “outside.” Deconstruction is neutral, suspended between yes and no, positioned at their point of intersection. It marks its distance both from the paradigm of crisis and that of critique. In Derrida’s hands, the deconstruction of metaphysics does not negate the latter’s mechanism of exclusion. Deconstruction rather suspends the mechanism of exclusion, applying it to itself in a self-dissolving movement. The reason for this is not that French Theory adheres to life (esistente); the distancing (and self-
distancing) aims for a certain self-ironic quality that, at a certain point, might inhibit any position, be it negative or affirmative.

If German Philosophy cathect negativity and French Theory neutralization, the prevailing mood of Italian Theory seems to be one of affirmation. Of course “affirmative thought” can mean many different things. Here, the phrase is meant to suggest a philosophy of immanence, which extends well beyond Italian philosophy and is associated with a tradition uniting Spinoza to Nietzsche, Bergson, and Deleuze. Without underestimating the differences among these thinkers, it can be argued that, by and large, the main effort of Italian philosophers has been to think not in a reactive but in an active, productive, affirmative way. In Italian Thought, even biopolitics does not exclude an affirmative orientation. Certainly, one might question the outcome of such an affirmative thought, but the fact remains that it does point in a different direction. Let us ask, then, about this direction. What does Italian philosophy affirm? I wish to propose that it affirms the critique of political theology. Classical Italian thought – and by this I mean the line that unites Machiavelli, Bruno, Genovesi, Leopardi – is pervaded by the critique of political theology, and the strong interest in this category extends to the present. All the leading figures in Italian Thought – from Tronti to Cacciari and Agamben – have reflected, in different ways, on the relation between theology and politics. A similar reflection was also behind Marramao and Vattimo’s theories of secularization, in the 1980s and 1990s, and Negri’s opposition of the Machiavelli-Spinoza-Marx tradition to the Hobbes-Kant-Hegel axis in the 1970s. There seems to be an effort to release the political from both the semantics of negativity and the semantics of neutralization.

Obviously, to understand what I am saying, it is necessary to specify what is meant by political theology. The twentieth-century debate offers several, often contrasting, definitions: the religious legitimation of power, the political use of theology, the engendering of political categories from theological categories, or, inversely, the engendering of the religious from the political. As discussed in my book, *Due. La macchina della teologia*
political theology is much more than a concept; it is a very old dispositif whose effects concern our time. Drawing on Heidegger and Foucault, I see political theology as a sort of machine which functions by separating our life from itself, both in the sense that it negates life and in the sense that it transcends life. This machine is a hybrid of Christian theology and Roman law, and, over the course of time, it has taken on different forms, but all linked to a mechanism of exclusionary inclusion (inclusione escludente). The phrase “political theology” suggests the convergence, in one and the same category, of two contrasting elements engaged in a mutual exclusion or subjection. Once we start paying attention, we notice that all the universals of Western thought – including the idea of the West, often used to represent a whole – obsessively reproduce this antinomial structure. If this structure, in fact, never stops operating, it means that we are in the presence neither of an event nor of an ideology, but of the way in which the order of the Western world is conceived. By political theology, therefore, is to be understood a recurrent two-part structure, a Two that is sublated into One by excluding, or marginalizing, its other part.

I believe that the task of thought is to open up to its outside. It is not an easy task because it amounts to the quest for a conceptual language external to the theological-political horizon. Italian Thought has played, and can play, an important role in this task since, as we have seen, it is a thought of the outside, traditionally oriented toward the outside, antithetical to interiority, to transcendence, to separation. Without neglecting the individual differences among authors, it would seem that all the major categories of Italian thought confirm this orientation. In particular, I would like to comment briefly on three categories defined by their tension with what opposes them: “community,” which stands opposed to “immunity;” “potentiality,” to “power;” and “conflict,” to “neutralization.”

As for the first, the Italian debate on the notion of community dates

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back to the 1980s. At that time theoretical research inaugurated a radical deconstruction of the metaphysical basis of community as the term had been previously used, first by German sociology (Gemeinschaft) and later by various strains of the ethics of communication, and, finally, by American communitarianism. To be sure, Nancy and Blanchot had anticipated this radical deconstruction of community, but what lends the Italian reflection on community a specific political, or biopolitical, tone lacking in French deconstruction is its articulation in opposition to the notion of immunity. The term “immunity,” also comes from the Latin and is the negative meaning of *munus*, originally indicating the law of a mutual gift. If *communitas* stands for a gift-giving commitment that binds its members to one another, *immunitas* is the *dispositif* which exempts the subject from the burden of the mutual gift. Thus, for example, in the juridical lexical field, immunity names the condition of those who are not subjected to the law, while in the medical or biological lexical fields an immune organism is a body capable of resisting external infectious agents.

The legal and the medical meanings overlap to grant us access to the biopolitical field, more so than the purely deconstructive notion of the “inoperative” or “unavowable.” 4 When an ever-invasive immunizing *dispositif* becomes the syndrome of our time, the idea and practice of community is the political form of resistance against it. The problem has a twofold solution: rendering inoperative the immunizing apparatuses and activating new common spaces. From this perspective, the reflection on common goods, which in Italy started earlier than anywhere else, as well as on the common as a good for everyone, has shifted the discourse on community in an increasingly political direction. The modern trend to make the common into the public, on the one hand, and into the private, on the other, has reached its climax with globalization. This trend takes on special significance in the current biopolitical regime, in which every good, whether it be material or immaterial, is made to relate to the human body, including the natural resources of language and intelligence. It

is precisely in response to this trend that the question of an affirmative biopolitics should be raised. The aim is to break the grip of the categories of the public and the private, which are crushing the common. In Italian Thought, the struggle against the privatization of water, of the earth, and of air is intertwined with the idea of a common intellect, in a tradition that begins with Averroes and continues with Marx and his notion of “general intellect.” The critique of the legal category of personhood, a central category of the theological-political dispositif, in favor of a thought of the impersonal, is connected to the same tradition.

The second category of Italian Thought is “potentiality.” It should be conceived as independent of – if not in contrast to – the notion of “act,” on the one hand, and that of “power,” on the other. Whether it is referred to thought or to a multiple form of subjectivity, potentiality belongs to the affirmative biopolitics mentioned earlier. Similarly to the pair community/immunity, potentiality takes on its meaning from two opposing poles. It is well known that in the Aristotelian tradition potentiality and act are dialectically linked in a relation of antithesis: what is in potential has not yet become act. Italian Thought contests precisely the necessity of this passage from potentiality to act in favor of a non-actualized potentiality, a potentiality that is not necessarily destined to be realized or not resolved in act.

The notion of potentiality, however, has two other antonyms: necessity, on the one hand, and power, on the other. Like possibility, potentiality constitutes the opposing pole of necessity. What is possible is what can be otherwise, or what can also not be and is, therefore, not necessary, as it is often thought in conjunction with a bitter philosophy of necessity. One need only consider how, in our own times, governmental politics invoke certain unbreakable, thus unquestionable, shibboleths as defensive arguments, a fact that Benjamin had already grasped when he spoke of “capitalism as religion.” Understood in its creative, imaginative, and innovative meaning, the notion of the “possible” opposes this economic theology and contests its metaphysical assumptions. From the same vantage point, one encounters the other opposing pole of potentiality, that is to say, a narrow and excluding notion of power. Whether referred to a thought or to a multitude, potentiality applies a pressure from within on the power
of the living (esistente). When considered in relation to the expansion of life, potentiality, too, is a category of affirmative biopolitics. The contrast, theorized by Antonio Negri, between constituting and constitutive power belongs to the semantics of potentiality, as does also the notion of a creative constructive capacity that cannot be halted without its losing its vital energy. This energetic potentiality is not only keyed into the contemporary debate but also comes from the work of Machiavelli, which represents the origin of Italian political thought. When it is argued that Machiavelli, unlike Hobbes, is not a thinker of the “State,” this means that he conceives the political in its becoming, as something that is never just a “state,” and cannot be without becoming.

The last figure of Italian thought is perhaps the most political. I am referring to the notion of conflict. In order to undo power or, at the very least, face it, potentiality must presuppose the possibility of a conflict with those who have power. Machiavelli famously lodged this extraordinary novelty in the heart of political thought, consequently, of Italian thought more generally. The originality of his constitutive biopolitics, aimed at creating a constitutive power, lies precisely in the revolutionary idea that order, by definition, does not exclude conflict, but rather includes it. For Machiavelli, conflict, understood more in its political than in its military meaning, is essential to order; without conflict, political order will harden and die out. From his perspective, the real enemy of potentiality is not conflict, but neutralization. Without forcing a connection between views that are too far apart in time, it should nevertheless be noted that Italian operaismo of the 1960s returns to Machiavelli’s thesis and translates it into practice. The fact that the workers’ point of view differs from that of capital, much as the point of view of a woman, in feminist thought, differs from that of a man, turns conflict into the germinal moment of Italian Thought. This perspective also can be traced to that critique of political theology, which carries the wider significance of Italian thought. If the theological-political machine excludes, with the tendency of the Two to make itself into One, Italian philosophy reclaims the necessity of the Two within the horizon of politics. Above all, because of this claim, one can speak of an Italian difference.