Re-Mapping Centre and Periphery

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Published by University College London

Hauswedell, Tessa, et al.
Re-Mapping Centre and Periphery: Asymmetrical Encounters in European and Global Contexts.
University College London, 2019.

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The Cosmopolitan Morphology of the National Discourse: Italy as a European Centre of Intellectual Modernity

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Introduction

The idea of Europe has always been a prominent topic of reflection for Italian authors. Dante Alighieri, in the Paradiso of his Divina Commedia, highlighted how Europa took upon herself the burden of bringing her peoples together under the banner of Christianity, a view appearing, with even greater force, in De Monarchia. Already in the fourteenth century, the identification of the geographical boundaries of the continent went hand in hand with reflections on the coexistence and, often, the unity of its peoples. Later on, the Protestant Reformation, political fragmentation and the division of Europe into nation states challenged views depicting Europe as a unitary, organic entity. Federico Chabod, author of the Storia dell’idea di Europa, reminds us of the clash between cosmopolitan ideals and the genesis of national unification projects, suggesting that the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries revealed the emergence of significant asymmetries among the European nations, concerning their engagement with the idea of Europe. Similarly, Benedetto Croce, who published Storia d’Europa nel secolo decimono in 1932, provided a sharp analysis of the Risorgimento as an age of nationalisms, pointing out that these thwarted, if not completely defeated, cosmopolitan enthusiasms.

Croce’s argument, initially formulated in the immediate aftermath of World War I, is powerful and accurate in its simplicity: the nineteenth
century, especially after the Restoration, witnessed the proliferation of various, often conflicting, worldviews and political doctrines, most notably clericalism, monarchical absolutism, democratic ideals and communism. These ideals, appearing to different extents in the various European countries, being so closely tied with the articulation of a national and nationalist discourse, called into question people’s belief in the cultural unity and, possibly, political homogeneity of Europe.

While Croce saw the Risorgimento as characterized by a tension between nationalisms and the European ideal, Gramsci proposed a different interpretation, focused on how foreign ideas and events, most notably the French Revolution, had an impact on the process of Italian unification: ‘the origin of the Risorgimento’, he claimed in his *Quaderni dal carcere*, ‘namely the formation process of the conditions and the international relations allowing Italy to unite itself as a nation … should not be searched in this or that concrete event taking place on a given date, but in the very historical transformation process of the European system’. Gramsci’s statement was exceptionally significant: on the one hand, it cemented the idea of the Italian Risorgimento as a transnational, i.e. European, phenomenon, encouraging the study of this period so as to take into account the interplay of numerous endogenous and external factors; on the other hand, it hinted at the possibility of challenging the tension between nationalism and European ideals by establishing that the quest for the articulation of an Italian national identity was intimately connected with the negotiation of the country’s position in the life of modern European nations. An approach of this kind inevitably contributed to the systematic rethinking of the asymmetrical relation between Italy and Europe, eroding notions of social and cultural backwardness and fully exploring an ideal of a unified Italy as a centre of European modernity.

Scholarship on the Risorgimento has, in recent years, contributed to an understanding of this period that goes beyond the mere analysis of political and socio-economic conditions, drawing attention to the specific, context-bound *outilage mental*, namely the constellation of discursive practices notionally belonging to the wider cultural and philosophical spheres, reflecting inclinations and concerns of the local intellectual landscape. In consequence, challenging the asymmetry between Europe and Italy entails the need to investigate the presence of a cosmopolitan sensitivity not only in Italian political thought, but also – and perhaps more importantly – in the broader cultural debates and philosophical attitudes of the decades preceding the unification. In short, the rethinking of the asymmetrical relation between Italy and Europe in the
nineteenth century has to begin with a more compelling understanding of their encounter: one that is focused on the transnational morphology of the unitary discourse.

**Italy and Europe: An asymmetrical encounter**

One may wonder why the relationship between Italy and Europe in the nineteenth century could be deemed ‘asymmetrical’. This can be illustrated by hard data: according to at least one interpretive model of the Risorgimento, namely one that engages primarily with socio-economic indicators, Italy was undoubtedly the laggard of Europe. Often erroneously attributed to Massimo D’Azeglio, the famous statement highlighting the need to ‘make the Italians’ after Italy had been ‘made’ after 1861, captured the nature of the challenges the new government was called to address, as it famously reflected the social ills and divisions of the period. Illiteracy amounted to a dramatic 75 per cent, and inhabitants of the South still referred to their northern neighbours as *forestieri*. This is striking if one compares these numbers with Britain, where the Victorian ‘obsession’ with education had boosted literacy rates to 75.4 per cent for men and 65.3 per cent for women in 1861. On the eve of the Franco-Prussian war, thanks to the efforts to promote mass literacy, 77 per cent of French men and 67 per cent of French women were able to read and write, with the gender gap being fully closed in the following years. Moreover, when Germany was unified in 1871, the literacy rate of the population amounted to 88 per cent.

In 1861, only 2 per cent of the Italian population had a right to vote: crippled by a debt of 2.5 billion lire, Italy’s wealth and political organization did not match those of other European nations. In the same years, Victorian Britain was enjoying economic prosperity and was about to approve the 1867 Reform Act, doubling the size of the electorate from one to two million people. The average income of Italian citizens was half that of their British contemporaries and a third of the French. Infrastructure, especially in the south of the peninsula, was scarce: in 1861, Italy’s railway system extended for 2,400 kilometres, while the Austrian Empire’s exceeded 3,000 kilometres, France’s 9,000 kilometres, Germany’s 11,000 kilometres and Britain’s 14,600 kilometres. Despite Italy’s advantageous geographical position, it suffered from severe insufficiencies in maritime transport, with the French able to move twice and Britain eight times the tonnage of the Italian fleet. Energy production was problematic, too: while industrialized Britain could rely on the production of 85 million
tonnes of coal a year and Germany of 18.7 million, Italy produced a meagre 34,000 tonnes.

The economic problems of the unified state were exacerbated by the historical divide between the north and the south of the peninsula, thematized as the *questione meridionale* by the inquiries led in the 1870s by Leopoldo Franchetti and Sydney Sonnino. Central to these studies was the identification of a dichotomy between North and South with regards to industrial development: in the Mezzogiorno, for instance, a remarkable lack of industry prior to unification reflected an extensive reliance upon proto-industrial production and agriculture; moreover, while the North had been receptive to technological innovations introduced in the context of the Napoleonic Wars, the South retained a systemic organization that resembled feudal structures. Production in the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies was largely geared towards domestic consumption and this, together with the exorbitant trade tariffs imposed by the Bourbon monarchy, resulted in a significant separation between northern and southern markets. Indeed this lack of homogeneity reflected profound structural differences: southern markets were poorly structured and very unassuming in their size, and so could not represent a viable destination for the manufacturing goods produced in the North. Similarly, agricultural produce from the South, most notably oil, wine and citrus fruit, was either too expensive for the relatively modest markets of Central Italy and of the North, or else its distribution was thwarted by competition from analogous goods produced in loco.

In short, when Italy was unified in 1861, cultural cohesion among Italians had not yet reached its maturity and a proper Italian economy, connecting all regions of the peninsula, was yet to be born. With powers like Britain, France and Germany leading Europe to an experience of modernity marked by technological progress, literacy and economic prosperity, Italy had the status of a periphery.

The nineteenth century witnessed the emergence of the concept of nation as the central subject of political life. The tension between national drives and the idea of a European order was particularly visible in political projects and philosophical speculation. One of the leading advocates of unification during the first half of the century, Gian Domenico Romagnosi, demonstrated a remarkable sensitivity for the encounter of national and continental interests, positing, however, that the two were not necessarily antithetical. His posthumously published *Scienza delle costituzioni* spoke extensively of the ‘reciprocal’ influence of European nations, a phenomenon deemed to be ‘unceasing’ and defining the continent since the Roman Empire. Nations, Romagnosi argued, ought to pursue independence and unity to become part of a ‘great European
family’: not a fully fledged confederation of states but a system of mutual enrichment and peaceful cooperation.\textsuperscript{15}

Romagnosi’s most notable pupil, Carlo Cattaneo, one of the most active proponents of a republican constitution for a unified Italy, reprised his mentor’s vision of a cohesive Europe, making it overtly political. A strong critic of any nationalist inclination, Cattaneo spoke of the much-debated notion of a ‘United States of Europe’, a federal institution aiming at preserving the ‘inner and external peace, ensuring the uniformity of the monetary system and spreading ideals’.\textsuperscript{16} This project was deemed unavoidable, due to the historical interconnectedness of Europe and to the nations’ tendency toward ‘a commonality of travels, commerce, science and laws’.\textsuperscript{17} Consequently, Cattaneo proposed the institution of yearly congresses, where scholars from various regions of the continent could come together and discuss matters of commerce, agriculture, geography and industry. For the author, a famous believer in the civic and socio-economic uses of scientific knowledge, the vision of the United States of Europe would serve a double purpose: on the one hand, it would enable the solid establishment of peace; on the other, it would contribute to the strengthening of Italy’s own political and cultural identity, a process fundamentally defined by a cultural and historical relationship, as well as the awareness of Europe \textit{qua} geopolitical space, which Italy belonged to and continuously engaged with.\textsuperscript{18}

The idea of Europe also permeated the thought of one of the figureheads of the unification, Giuseppe Mazzini. Largely informed by the desire to foster European support for the cause of Italian unification, Mazzini’s reflections on a continental confederation emphasized the need to actively educate people about European ideas and values, in contrast to Romagnosi and Cattaneo’s reliance on notions of the historical interconnectedness of the continent and faith in progress. In this sense, Mazzini’s calls for the articulation of a European identity entailed the need for the voluntary and deliberate action of the various states, whom he urged to educate, via a programme hovering between politics and pedagogy, the youth on the grand ideals of the federation. In consequence, Mazzini was fundamentally hostile to any attempt to unify Europe via military action, such as Napoleon’s campaigns, or via formal unions among leaders, such as the making of the Holy Alliance by Austria, Prussia and Russia in 1815. Crucially, while a precise characterization of his European project remained rather nebulous throughout all his writings, there is little doubt that Mazzini’s political thought was animated by the desire to amalgamate local sovereignty with a wider transnational sensitivity. Consequently, he established the Giovane Italia in 1831 and
the Giovane Europa in 1834, whose primary goal was to bring together the European people who aspired to national unity as a means to spread the values of European democracy and peace.

It can already be seen, at this point, how the idea of Europe was prominent in nineteenth-century Italian political thought, but, while a significant number of authors were drawn towards a cosmopolitan dimension of politics, others highlighted the utopian character of this vision. What united these viewpoints was that they all acknowledged the asymmetries among European nations, whose peaceful and democratic coexistence was thus inevitably threatened: while firmly believing that some form of engagement among European people was one of the defining characteristics of the Western world, Giuseppe Ferrari admitted that, following the Revolution and the Napoleonic experience, France had imposed itself as the leading power in the continent, and was destined to act as a guide to all other nations. Camillo Benso, Count of Cavour was, already in the 1820s, profoundly hostile to the establishment of European institutions. In his analysis, this would only be possible if no state had any comparative advantage over others, whether in an economic, political or cultural sense. In the nineteenth century, his argument continued, the implementation of a European project would give the strongest powers of the continent carte blanche to interfere with both the foreign and domestic policies of the others.

More examples of sensitivity to the asymmetrical encounter between Italy and Europe can be found in Cesare Balbo’s 1844 text Delle speranze d’Italia, in which he plotted the difficult path towards Italian national unity against the wider context of European politics and society. His analysis highlights the idiosyncrasies of the country’s production and employment rates, military expenditure, geography and government, drawing attention to their relative backwardness vis-à-vis other continental powers. This, in turn, would make any sort of agreement or alliance among European powers boil down to an entente of the stronger ones, sharing common political and commercial interests. Consequently, despite an awareness of the debate connected with a project of European scope, Balbo urged his readers to direct their efforts to the pursuit of national unification alone. A similar argument was provided by Terenzio Mamiani, who, as an exile in Paris, attempted to convince the French government to intervene in the Papal States to avert the dangers connected with the local restoration backed by Austrian forces. The failure of this project paved the way for Mamiani’s acknowledgment of the impossibility for Italy to pursue independence and unity with the support of any foreign power. His judgment essentially revolved around the recognition of the selfishness driving the individual
states in the international arena. The European project, therefore, appeared fundamentally flawed to Mamiani, as it would hinder the free deployment of Italy's national character and further enforce its servility to the stronger powers of the continent.

While the verdicts on the vision of a unified Europe among nineteenth-century Italian political thinkers diverged – both in terms of their judgments on the encounter of nationalist and cosmopolitan sensitivities and with regard to the acknowledgment of the existing asymmetries between the peninsula and the rest of the continent – their debates on the unification of the country were often connected with reflections on the European dimension of politics. Put simply, for many political thinkers of the Risorgimento, reflections on the political organization of a unified Italy naturally entailed the need to interrogate where the country was to stand in relation to the other continental powers. The juxtaposition of national and European themes reflected a bi-directional relationship between Italy and Europe in the Risorgimento political imagination: not only did Italian intellectuals question the extent to which Italy was to take part in the vision of a European order, but they also – and more importantly – explored the extent to which foreign powers were to inform the process of Italian unification. This intuition is an opportunity for historians of the Risorgimento who understand this period as characterized by transnational connections to attempt to map out the European forces acting on the process of shaping the Italian national identity.

**National primacy and transnational sensitivities**

Nation is not exclusively a political concept. Alberto Banti reminded us that national discourse imposed itself, in the nineteenth century, as an amalgam of three distinct meanings: birthplace, the commonality of customs, and the historical cultural and linguistic community. The third meaning of the term ‘nation’ is the most interesting one since, especially during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the articulation of an Italian national identity revolved around the historical development of the peninsula’s culture and traditions. In consequence, the identification of cosmopolitan elements belonging to the discourse of unification ought to take into account much wider debates taking place throughout the decades preceding 1861, going beyond a purely political domain and highlighting the thematization of European modernity as part of a broader cultural and intellectual milieu. What ought to be investigated is the openness of Italian intellectuals towards foreign ideas, seen not only...
as a means to contribute to the definition of a national identity, but also as conducive to the negotiation of a space for Italy in the intellectual life of the continent.

The centrality of the topic of nation owes much to Vincenzo Cuoco’s speculation at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Cuoco, who famously fled Naples following King Ferdinand IV’s retaliation against the supporters of the Neapolitan Republic briefly established in 1799 by the French, devoted his work to a clear goal, one that already revealed the need for Italy to acquire a unified national cultural and philosophical character to stand tall in the contemporary philosophical landscape of Europe. Specifically, Cuoco aimed at ‘forming the public spirit of the nation’ and ‘beginning to engage, at least with our thought, with other nations, growing accustomed to considering the glory of Italy as a shared one’. Crucially, while the concept of nation was generally adopted by the Southern émigré as a signifier for the Mezzogiorno alone, recent historiography has highlighted how his works featured the earliest theorization of the nazione del Risorgimento discussed by Banti. This was because at the core of Cuoco’s verdicts lay a remarkable sensitivity to the asymmetries characterizing the relationship between an Italian spirit and its continental counterparts, notably France’s: in his analysis, the French Revolution had brought about a sense of unity and solidarity that was simply missing in Italy, due to the failure of the 1799 revolutionary impulses, so deepening the gap between the country’s ‘two peoples’, a well-off minority and a badly off majority, on whose reconciliation hinged the cultural and political unity of the nation.

Elsewhere, he applauded the US Bill of Rights for appealing to the public sentiment of the American people, suggesting that even the political organization of a country largely depended on a solid national identity and shared values and customs. This operation could only be achieved by fostering ‘self-esteem’ in Italy’s public spirit, a quality observable, in Cuoco’s view, in French and English debates on their respective national character. An understanding of the means by which European nations managed to acquire greater ‘self-esteem’ led the Neapolitan author to identify the rediscovery and evaluation of a nation’s cultural tradition as conducive to a stronger national unity: Germany and France, he argued, ‘have endowed history with a dramatic garb which renders it at once more pleasant and more instructive. For the same reason that people prefer fables to speeches, they prefer drama to fables, for they become fellow citizens of the protagonists of the story, and they are instructed almost as if witnessing and
acting in the first person, which is the easiest and most effective way to instruct oneself.\textsuperscript{29}

Cuoco’s call for the articulation of an organic national identity clearly stemmed from his perception of the asymmetrical encounter between Italy – a nation yet to be culturally, let alone politically, unified – and other European powers that championed shared values, sentiments, culture and customs. It did not, however, take long for Cuoco to elaborate a blueprint for the intellectual unification of the nation. This took the form of an epistolary novel, \textit{Plato in Italy}, published between 1804 and 1806. Cuoco presented it as a translation of an imaginary ancient Greek manuscript, detailing Plato’s visit to Southern Italy. In the book, the Greek philosopher visits a number of small communities that display strikingly progressive customs, such as the complete emancipation of women among the Sannites, excellent organizational skills, a very creative language, peaceful behaviour and sheer brilliance in the scientific and intellectual domains. These talents are associated with an obscure Pythagorean genius, which Plato comes to identify with the historical making of the Italian national character: ‘I venture to say’, he declares, ‘that Pythagoras never existed; he is rather an idea conjured up by people to denote a system of cognitions whose origins are very ancient, and that has been conserved and handed down through a board of wise men who were born and raised in Italy’. Cuoco identifies these ‘wise men’ as the Etruscans, regarded as the bearers of the ‘most ancient wisdom of the Italians’ initially theorized by the Neapolitan philosopher Giambattista Vico.\textsuperscript{30} This notion leads Plato to acknowledge the Italians’ superiority over the Greeks, as ‘these nations that we deem barbaric have been cultured long before us’.\textsuperscript{31} Cuoco’s \textit{Plato in Italy} can be read as a metaphor for the encounter, in the nineteenth century, of the Italian and the French nations: the boastfulness and over-inflated sense of pride of the external observers is dramatically challenged by the observation of the ‘Pythagorean genius’ of the Italians. Therefore, just as Cuoco’s Plato was forced to recognize Italy’s cultural superiority over Greece, the French of the present must acknowledge the uniqueness of the peninsula’s tradition and its historical intellectual primacy over Europe.

This notion of \textit{primacy} is unquestionably a key concept to investigate in order to make sense of Italy’s relationship with the European intellectual landscape of the nineteenth century. An investigation of this concept, however, is rendered problematic by the fact that it served a dual purpose: on the one hand, it allowed Italian thinkers to appeal to their tradition to challenge their perceived asymmetrical position in relation to contemporary experiences of European modernity; on the
other, it erected a wall around the country’s cultural heritage, rendering it untouchable and fundamentally hostile to foreign influences. At any rate, while the transnational implications of the notion of primacy remain an open question, the relevance of this concept to the discourse of the unification is not in doubt: by projecting this idea to the core of the debates concerned with the cultural unification of Italy, Cuoco contributed to the definition of the Italian people as a cohesive and organic unit, popularizing his belief in the unified nation as a reflection of a shared cultural heritage.

Following Vincenzo Cuoco’s exhortation to embrace Italy’s great tradition, there was a proliferation of works arguing the same: Ugo Foscolo’s Sepolcri praised the resilience of the Italian national character, positing that it was exactly on the example of the men of genius of the past that a newfound cultural cohesion ought to be established; Giuseppe Micali’s book L’Italia avanti il dominio de’ romani (1810) went even further back, connecting the efforts of the present with the shared pre-Roman origins of the Italian people; Angelo Mazzoldi’s Delle origini italiche e della diffusione dell’incivilimento italiano (1840) linked the historical origin of the Italian nation with Plato’s allegory of Atlantis, the fictitious embodiment of the ideal city-state detailed in the Republic, to symbolize the historical intellectual primacy of Italy over other European nations.

At any rate, while these works differed in so far as they tended to locate the origin of an Italian national culture in different areas and different historical periods, their most striking shared feature was a passionate cult of history and of the past. It is difficult, therefore, to see how the primacy of Italy – which, according to Foscolo, was still observable with Machiavelli and Galileo – could be rescued from a sterile cult of the past and fully projected into the context of the nineteenth century. New questions therefore emerged: could Italy’s primacy still be observable in the present? How would it inform the country’s relation to other European nations?

One of the most interesting and notorious answers to these questions appeared in 1843, when Vincenzo Gioberti’s essay Del primato morale e civile degli italiani proposed an unconventional solution to the problem of the unification, indicating, at the same time, how the country was to stand in relation to its European peers. Initially associated with Mazzinian ideals, to such an extent that his self-imposed exile was caused by unjust accusations concerning his alleged involvement with initiatives promoted by the Giovane Italia in the early 1830s, Vincenzo Gioberti soon became one of the most influential moderate liberals of the 1840s, who, in direct opposition to Mazzini’s call for political action
‘from below’, sought to elaborate programmes of reform in concert with the existing powers and with the support of the liberal aristocracy, but without profoundly altering the status quo. Gioberti’s *Primato* proposed a reprise of Guelph federalism, arguing in favour of the full liberation from foreign influences and the transformation of Italy into a confederation of existing states, with the Pope acting as a symbolic head of the union.\(^2\)

Gioberti’s political project, however, reflected much wider considerations on the historical character of the Italian nation that appeared to be consistent with the ongoing tendency to look at Italy’s past traditions to remodel the present and shape the future: his was a precise understanding of Italian history, concentrating on the identification of religion as an inherently national institution. The Church was seen as the chief source of Italy’s cultural unity and prosperity in the past, as well as a guide to follow if the country was to carve out a prominent position for itself in contemporary European politics.\(^3\) Gioberti’s idea was not a novel one. It was the Neapolitan Giambattista Vico who, more than a hundred years earlier, had spoken of Christianity as the prime source of cultural unity,\(^4\) but these observations appeared in Gioberti with unprecedented force, further amplified by the political significance that they bore. The author’s understanding of the history of Italy, the ‘religious nation par excellence’,\(^5\) was essentially an inquiry into its primacy and the ways in which this had become manifest throughout history: the spiritual powers supporting the edifice of Italian culture and politics made the latter tower above all other nations of Europe for centuries, granting Italy an authoritative status in all aspects of knowledge from philosophy to literature, from science to fine arts, from political theory to history, which virtually no one could challenge.

Ever since Roman times, Gioberti argued, the historical development of Italian culture had been inextricably linked with the actions of the Church: Rome’s position at the core of Christian Europe was synonymous with a moral and civic vantage point over the rest of the continent. Even after the end of the Roman Empire, the Church managed to maintain a degree of unity and cohesion, at least in terms of shared tradition and customs, among the people of the peninsula. The centuries following the end of the Empire, he continued, witnessed the continuous efforts of the Church to rescue Italian culture from the threat of fragmentation, especially considering the tendency, particularly evident between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, to portray the papacy as an obstacle to national unification.\(^6\) The Reformation aggravated the threat of divisions, not only in terms of the immediate challenge it posed to the
unity of Christianity, but also – and, in Gioberti’s view, even more dramatically – because of the introduction of foreign ‘barbarian’, subjectivist and empiricist, ideas into the philosophical landscape of the peninsula.  

For these reasons, Italy found itself in a position of subordination to the emerging European powers such as France, England and Prussia. France, in particular, was targeted with remarkable force by Gioberti: the actions of Charles VIII, Louis XIV and, later on, Napoleon, were accused of having dramatically challenged Italy’s aspirations to independence and having contributed to spreading a tendency to ‘corrupt, maim and uproot’ the principles of divine revelation, by encouraging a blind obedience to the ideas of René Descartes.  

As a result, Italian culture, tainted with a servile imitation of foreign ideas, ideologies and institutions, engaged with the rest of Europe in a relationship of dependence, strongly hindering, on the one hand, the country’s unique spiritual status and, on the other, preventing the flourishing of the local, native culture.

Yet the acknowledgment of the asymmetrical nature characterizing Italy’s relationship to the rest of Europe from the Reformation onwards did not prevent Gioberti from offering a positive evaluation of the country’s historical primacy in the context of the Risorgimento. He boldly stated, in fact, that ‘Italy features within itself, mainly thanks to religion, all the necessary conditions for its national and political Risorgimento’, arguing against Mazzinian revolutionary ideals and the dependence on foreign intervention. All it takes, he posited, is the consolidation of national culture, along lines informed by the historical pre-eminence of the Church in the intellectual life of Italy, as well as the perpetuation of its centrality in politics, a programme seen as unquestionably consistent with the country’s history.  

Yet while the book, both in its historical analysis and its propositions for the Risorgimento, revealed an interest in the cultural and political dynamics of the wider continent, the tone was not a cosmopolitan, but a nationalist one. More specifically, Gioberti’s argument rested on the idea that the relationship between Italian and foreign culture must be radically altered, with preference given to native forces over external ones.

The idea of complete closure to foreign influences, already visible in Antonio Rosmini’s essay *Nuovo saggio sull’origine delle idee* (1830), achieved wide popularity thanks to the dissemination of Gioberti’s *Primato*, which was circulated in virtually all regions of Italy. Francesco De Sanctis recounted, in his autobiography *La giovinezza*, how, on reading the book, he had immediately identified it as the ideological forerunner of a new, rapidly growing school of thought that championed the absolute primacy of the Italian language, rhetoric, style and culture at large, rejecting
any engagement with its European counterparts. This view was reflected by the popularity, in the 1840s, of literary purism, a trend upholding the imitation of Italian language and literature of the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, in direct opposition to the French inflections perceivable in various regions. Indeed, Gioberti’s Primato was exceptionally critical of France, which he accused of having ‘infected’, with its ideas and language, the cultural patrimony of other nations. Germany was commonly targeted, too: Luigi Palmieri, who became a university professor of philosophy and logic in Naples in 1847, believed in the need to prevent the spread of the dangerous ‘German pantheism’ in national culture, encouraging, instead, the systematic rediscovery of the local tradition: ‘In declaring myself openly to be a loyal follower of our native thought’, he claimed in the introductory lecture of his university course, ‘I cannot but reprove the repeated attempts to enable certain foreign doctrines to take root among us. Today we are infested with German encroachments because there are some teachers who would indoctrinate our youth with German pantheism, especially with that brand which is rigged out in the imposing and grandiose cloak of George Frederich Hegel.’

Gioberti and Palmieri’s examples of exasperated cultural nationalism could hardly represent an encouraging background for compelling developments in Italian philosophy, let alone for the movement of Italy towards a European conception of modernity and the negotiation of a vantage point in the intellectual landscape of the continent. While their arguments attempted to strengthen a national identity via cultural unity, they remained ambiguous as to the relevance of Italy’s past primacy in the present, and hence failed to articulate the progressive character of the country’s intellectual forces. Not long before unification, therefore, the asymmetry between Italy and Europe had not been overcome: on a purely socio-economic level, the peninsula paled in comparison to the other powers of the continent; on a political level, the cosmopolitan enthusiasms of the Mazzinian generation, especially following the battle of Goito on 30 May 1848, had been replaced by a widespread feeling that the cause of national unification could not be pursued by relying on anyone other than Carlo Alberto, thereby further establishing the centrality of Piedmont in Risorgimento politics. It was in the intellectual field, however, that nineteenth-century Italy presented the most vehement resistance to European ideas: fully conscious of the contemporary decline of Italian philosophy, several intellectuals of the period opted for a passionate, yet fruitless, veneration of the country’s past tradition, based on debatable notions of historical primacy, therefore shielding the peninsula from any foreign contamination.
Challenging Asymmetry: Spaventa’s ‘circularity’ of European thought

This nationalist swing in cultural debates of the nineteenth century was particularly marked in the South, where, especially after the revolutionary turmoil in 1820–1, institutional arrangements set forth by the Bourbon monarchy had strongly undermined the penetration of European ideas into the Kingdom. Already in 1820, King Ferdinand returned to Latin as the language of education, substantially increased import taxes on foreign books, and issued a list of prohibited texts. Libraries in the Kingdom were subject to regular inspections carried out by a special commission and, in most cases, witnessed significant portions of their collections, most notably German philosophy books or treatises on the Enlightenment, being taken away. At the end of June 1821, the King symbolically marked the rejection of late eighteenth-century French philosophy by publicly burning books by Voltaire, Diderot and d’Alembert. After the Revolution of 1848, the Bourbon monarchy renewed its efforts to maintain control over the Kingdom via the creation of a loyal and efficient bureaucracy, the reorganization of the army and the refusal to engage with European politics and ideas, encouraging instead an unconditioned allegiance to Neapolitan culture and tradition, as was often lamented by local chroniclers.

At the same time, the South also represented the cradle of a truly progressive philosophy, namely one that fully blurred the lines between nationalism and cosmopolitanism, one that completely subverted notions of primacy and asymmetries, and finally depicted Italy as a philosophical centre of European modernity. While, in fact, the neo-Guelph Giobertian solution was acquiring traction in public debates and intellectual circles, a group of Southern intellectuals, brought together by passionate support for the cause of unification, a common revolutionary fervour and a particular fondness for German idealism, emerged as the forerunner of an intellectual revolution aimed at establishing the cultural unity that was seen as the most salient characteristic of modern European nations, especially Germany. Among these intellectuals, Bertrando Spaventa quickly affirmed himself as the figurehead of the new worldview. Born in the Abruzzo town of Bomba in 1817, Bertrando moved to Naples at an early age and, together with his brother Silvio, wrote for the periodical Il Nazionale, a left-leaning newspaper that served as a voice for the radical Neapolitan youth. After the failure of 1848, Spaventa, unlike his brother who was sentenced to prison, was exiled to Turin, where his journalistic activity remained devoted to the popularization of Hegel’s philosophy as
a paradigm for the cultural unification of Italy, a means for the promotion of secular politics and, broadly speaking, a guiding light for the future of Europe.\textsuperscript{35} It was between 1858 and 1860, however, with his lectures at the universities of Modena and Bologna, that Bertrando’s philosophical vision was fully realized as the theory of circularity of European thought, later published in the volume *La filosofia italiana nelle sue relazioni colla filosofia europea*.

A dart of criticism directed against Gioberti’s neo-Guelph cultural nationalism, Spaventa’s best-known work dismantled the popular view that Italian philosophy was fundamentally detached from modern European thought.\textsuperscript{36} In this sense, the blind exaltation of the country’s past tradition was condemned as a deplorable solution and a means of shielding oneself from the ideas of present-day Europe. Italian philosophy, according to Spaventa, did not end with the Renaissance; rather, it ‘went on to develop in freer lands and among freer intellects’.\textsuperscript{37} Consequently, engagement with contemporary European ideas was seen as synonymous with the discovery of a new chapter in the life of Italian philosophy, namely one that took place abroad: ‘seeking Italian philosophical thought in its new fatherland does not entail a servile imitation of German nationality. Rather, it constitutes a recovery of something that belonged to us, of something that, under different guises, has become part of a universal spirit, the essential condition of our civilization, as well as all other people’s. It is not our philosophers of the last two centuries, but Spinoza, Kant, Fichte, Schelling and Hegel who are the true disciples of Bruno, of Vanini, of Campanella, of Vico and other illustrious authors’.\textsuperscript{38}

Spaventa proposed a very elastic definition of philosophy that was not bound to specific national traditions, but emerged as a global phenomenon, stemming from intergenerational, transnational exchanges. Already during Roman times, it was possible to speak of the transnational nature of philosophy’s vocabulary: drawing extensively upon Vico’s definition of *Antiquissima Italorum Sapientia*, Spaventa suggested that many terms were characterized by a philosophical meaning that was too great to have evolved out of the popular use of the terms themselves. Consequently, he concluded, they must have been borrowed from foreign populations, particularly the Etruscans and Ionians, as already hinted by Cuoco roughly half a century earlier, in his commentaries on Vico. Transnational intellectual exchanges were even more evident from the Renaissance onwards and their effect was said to be extremely visible in the present: ‘Modern philosophy’, Spaventa claimed, ‘is not the work of a single nation, but of all’. Those that appeared to be ‘national
philosophies’ were, instead, ‘nothing more than stations through which thought, in its immortal course, passes. Modern philosophy, therefore, is neither exclusively English, nor French, nor Italian, nor German, but European.’

Spaventa identified Italy during the Renaissance as the birthplace of modern ideas, paying particular attention to the ongoing rejection of Scholastic philosophy via the rehabilitation of inquiries on nature and subjectivity. He then illustrated how these innovations ought to be seen as conducive to the encounter of local and foreign philosophies: Giordano Bruno’s definition of Nature as Deus in rebus was said to have anticipated Spinoza’s Deus sive Natura, the manifesto of modern immanence; Tommaso Campanella’s emphasis on sensitivity and experience as the basis of all knowledge was described as the forerunner of empiricism and Cartesian rationalism. As the mature reflections of Spinoza and Descartes revealed the magnitude of the dichotomy between sense perception and intellect, man was still perceived exclusively as an effect, that is, as a product of God’s creation. It was exactly the critique of this mono-directional account of causality, operated via Locke’s empiricism in England and Gottfried Leibniz’s Monadology in Germany, that sought to elaborate an account of man as cause, namely as the free maker of himself. While these ideas originally appeared abroad, it was only in Italy, Spaventa continued, that the tension between man as effect and man as cause was resolved. The philosopher credited for this innovation was Giambattista Vico, who blurred the definitions of the two categories by amalgamating them in a wider notion of progress, seen as the World Spirit’s perpetual process of self-negotiation. ‘Vico denies any parallel’, Spaventa writes; ‘nature is the phenomenon and the basis of Spirit, the premise that Spirit makes for itself, in order to be true unity. True unity, the true One, true development: development of itself; from itself, via itself, to itself: that is, completely itself.’

Vico’s innovation paved the way for the elaboration of a new metaphysics, accounting for perpetual progress and self-negotiation, rather than immediate causation. In a particularly poignant section of his book, Spaventa claimed that ‘Vico anticipates the problem of knowledge, demanding a new metaphysics anchored to human ideas; he is sensitive to the idea of Spirit, hence creating philosophy of history. Vico is the true precursor of Germany’. This is exactly where, according to the author, the diaspora of Italian philosophy was most dramatically observable: after Vico, it was only in other European countries, particularly in Germany, that a meaningful intellectual life had been taking place. Immanuel Kant was to be credited for the elevation of the themes problematized
by Vico into a transcendental psychologism, resolving the problem of knowledge and its intelligibility with the intuition of its synthetic unity. Later on, Spaventa continued, the presence of the same problem could be observed in Fichte’s *Selbstbewuβtsein*, the transcendental realism of Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie* and, more importantly, Hegel’s idealism, positing the ultimate question as to how Spirit realizes itself in history and in man’s experience of it. According to Spaventa, it was exactly in the Italian philosophy of the Renaissance that the debates animating the nineteenth-century European intellectual landscape would deepen their roots: *La filosofia italiana* illustrated a well-defined trajectory linking Bruno and Campanella with present-day German thought, brought together by the persistent search for unity in history.

The stage was now set for the final thrust of Spaventa’s argument. To restore its status of pre-eminence among the nations of Europe, Italy had to rediscover its own philosophy in its mature, cosmopolitan form: as the country’s tradition had ‘developed in the motion of German intellects’, it was necessary, for the thinkers of the peninsula, not to engage with foreign authors ‘in the same way as goods are imported’, but via the recognition of their shared intellectual genealogy. This process, according to the author, was already well underway. Both the Italian and the German traditions were said to have deep roots in debates initially appearing during the Italian Renaissance and, consequently, they were both concerned with the same questions. As proof of this, Spaventa drew a parallel between Pasquale Galluppi and Immanuel Kant: both had ‘inherited’ a concern for the problem of knowledge from Vico. As a result, thanks to his empiricist philosophical inclination, Galluppi was said to be ‘unknowingly Kantian’. Similarly, Antonio Rosmini, notoriously critical of foreign ideas, was nonetheless said to have theorized a notion of ‘primitive synthesis of reason and perception’ mirroring Kant’s notion of ‘transcendental imagination’, mediating between sense and intellect. Another interesting comparison was between Hegel and Gioberti: just as the German idealist had moved beyond his predecessors by positing the absolute self-awareness of Reason as a token of the infinite possibility of knowledge, Gioberti had overcome the limits of Galluppi and Rosmini by theorizing an ‘Absolute Mind’, decreeing the infinite potentiality of knowledge via the dialectic of its creative force. To paraphrase Spaventa’s verdict on Galluppi, Gioberti was seen as ‘unknowingly Hegelian’, much closer to German idealism than he was ready to admit himself. It was only thanks to the recognition of the similarities between the Italian and German philosophical landscapes, Spaventa argued, that the peninsula could achieve the cultural unity observable in other European countries,
thus creating ‘a historical Italy, having its worthy place in the common life of modern nations’. 

**Conclusion**

The ‘circularity of European thought’ was not only an attempt to challenge notions of primacy, seeing the centrality of the Italian tradition as limited to the Renaissance, but also – and much more importantly – a means of de-provincializing nineteenth-century debates taking place in the country, showing how they reflected a much more modern, European experience of modernity. This verdict rests on a series of interconnected insights.

First, the political and cultural discourse concerned with the unification of Italy reflected a concern for the nation’s role in the broader picture of the whole continent. Ever since the early decades of the Risorgimento, Italian intellectuals had questioned the extent to which a unified country was to partake in a European scheme of coexistence and cooperation. The variety of their answers was extraordinary, ranging from visions of a fully fledged continental federation to downright rejections of any foreign influence. Yet even the most markedly nationalist positions, such as Rosmini and Gioberti’s, stemmed from cosmopolitan premises or, at least, from the recognition of the historical tendency of nations to come into contact and affect one another.

Secondly, while the analysis of nineteenth-century thinkers’ appraisal of Italy’s place in Europe already revealed the strikingly cosmopolitan morphology of the national discourse, debates on Europe’s relationship to Italy, especially in the broader cultural and philosophical spheres, provided even more interesting food for thought, challenging notions of asymmetries and imbalances between the two. Bertrando Spaventa’s theory of the circularity of European thought was the most progressive and convincing attempt to rethink the relation between the country and the continent, dealing a hard blow to the widespread ultra-nationalist views of the 1840s. More specifically, Spaventa beat Gioberti at his own game: his argument rested on the same premise as his opponent’s, namely the recognition of the centrality of Italian Renaissance philosophy. Unlike Gioberti, however, who saw it as fundamental to a nationalist discourse, Spaventa slotted it into the wider cosmopolitan ideal of a purely European intellectual history, positing a serious challenge to the idea of an asymmetrical encounter between Italy and the rest of the continent. In this sense, the theory of the circularity
of European thought towered above the plurality of nineteenth-century theories about this encounter, thanks to its originality and the breadth of its scope.

A third insight had to do with the very nature of the challenge posed: once again, unlike Gioberti, who countered the perceived asymmetry by completely turning it on its head, Spaventa posited that no imbalance had ever existed, considering that the history of European philosophy was one of constant, self-perpetuating transnational exchange, of continuous dialogue among its parts, and of non-competitive encounter.

Lastly, it is notable that the most compelling and successful attempt to negotiate a vantage point for Italy in the intellectual life of modern European nations came from the leading exponent of a group of Southern thinkers. And noticing that the South, a peripheral region in a peripheral nation of Europe, put itself and the rest of Italy at the very centre of the continent’s intellectual landscape is a charming discovery.

Notes

1. Paradiso, XXVII, 84.
5. Antonio Gramsci, Quaderni dal carcere. Turin: Einaudi, 1963
43. See in this context the previous chapter by Jens Späth.
52. Spaventa, *La filosofia italiana*, 141.