

Do Intellectuals Still Exist? The Case of Italy

Alfonso Berardinelli

Culture no longer judges society

It has never been easy to understand what intellectuals are, or even whether they still exist or are now in the process of vanishing into a huge 'cultural middle class' where high culture and mass culture meld into one another.

But in the past, and without going back very far in time, intellectuals certainly did exist. Whether they were drawn to the tendency to put themselves at the service of the ruling power or felt they were called to exercise their own particular gifts, even heroically (and we do not lack examples, from Socrates through Giordano Bruno to Rimbaud, Wittgenstein or Orwell), intellectuals have also developed particular forms of unstable behaviour: a desire for recognition, a will to power, fatuity, self-punishing rigour. Though they were the first to lay claim to a halo, they were their own critics and most determined detractors as well. It might be said that self-glorification and self-denigration were part of the identity and tradition of intellectuals. Taking on too many tasks, which they did not complete, renegeing on their promises, loading themselves with responsibilities like saints or thinking themselves as wonderful and free as demi-gods, all that was a central part of their rituals, be they those of Carnival or of Lent. Even if nowadays it is questionable whether tradition is being kept up, the spectacle goes on, sometimes with old masks and rich costumes. At times intellectuals behave like buffoons, at others they flagellate themselves or act as if they were oracles, or even dream of government.

But do they have nothing else to do? And do they really not do anything else? In fact, even when they see themselves as a group, intellectuals remain a heterogeneous category. In their work, universal and particular, specific skill or public responsibility, as people used to say, are continually meeting and combining. It is desirable that architects should have their own philosophy of social life, but also that they should put up pleasing buildings that are in keeping. It is natural that scientists should do fundamental research, but also that they should discover better possible

Copyright © ICPHS 2004

SAGE: London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi, www.sagepublications.com

DOI: 10.1177/0392192104047882

ways of living. It is fair that artists should be able to express themselves freely, but also that they should interest and enthuse us and not be tedious. It is inevitable that teachers should teach not only how to do something but also what it is preferable to do and why, in other words that they should transmit not only techniques but values too.

Whereas in the past they were so busy defining themselves and allotting themselves tasks, today intellectuals seem to want to vanish from the scene, plunge into anonymity and become invisible. The idea of being a category makes them uncomfortable. The intellectual individual or small group feels justifiably powerless faced with forces that are pushing the social machine on towards who knows what. Those who make 'crucial decisions' no longer want to listen, or so it seems, to experts' opinions, any more than they take account of cultural criticism. Politicians and managers, like every species of animal, only change their behaviour if they feel threatened by an obvious danger. And intellectuals seldom manage to look threatening. A great many socially oriented activities carried on by intellectuals have in recent years been becoming invisible, unrepresentable, almost hidden. Who on earth talks about what is being or ought to be done, for instance, by those indispensable intellectuals, primary school teachers? Who, for goodness sake, wishes to think about the public responsibility of chemists, doctors, journalists? The idea of a History as a rational, unitary, controllable process towards liberation was invented by intellectuals, and it has been shattered. But the most visible result of that crisis is a general lack of interest in assessing projects and reviewing forecasts. Constructing an idea of the future is seen as a utopian demand. And yet never before have human societies been connected to one another, as they are today, by bonds of life and death, as they rush at an accelerating pace towards an unknown future.

Intellectuals, who thought in the 18th century that they could lay down laws for organizing and developing society, are at the end of the 20th taking refuge in the theory of knowledge as interpretation. At the beginning of Modernity, the *philosophes* saw themselves in a universalist light: gradually knowledge was being acquired about a human race moving towards liberty and equality. Nowadays, in a context defined as post-modern, intellectuals have for several decades given up being an elite that judges, whose duty is not only to produce knowledge but also to propose values and social models.

This disillusionment on the part of intellectuals is not just a reasonable resizing of overblown ambitions. It also denotes a loss of courage and lucidity. Post-modern intellectuals, who have abandoned 'the universalizing ambitions peculiar to their tradition', as Bauman says, are content to administer the communication rules internal to cultural tradition. What was once the intellectual elite is now, according to some analysts, a social group that is concerned above all with itself. But this is how the whole cultural tradition is reduced to being merely the tradition of a section, the particular domain of intellectuals as a specialized group, and is tending to lose its importance as a pointer for society as a whole. Culture no longer judges society by comparing facts and values: instead it is becoming a managed fraction of society beyond whose frontiers it is impossible to step.

Nation and modernity

One of the most striking paradoxes in Italian literary culture is this: like the Greeks, from the outset we Italians had our own Homer, our gigantic world writer, our encyclopedia in poetic form, our giant prophet-poet, scholar-poet, scientist-poet, politician-poet. But after Dante, whose work quickly aged and was ignored during the centuries immediately following, having had in Dante perhaps the most 'committed' and invincible writer Europe has ever known, our literature then often closed in upon itself, sheltering behind all kinds of barriers.

You cannot have it all: maybe a literature that had Dante could not have a Balzac or a Tolstoy as well. After having epic allegorical poetry or figurative realism, it could not also have the epic novel, the novel of everyday life, the realism that reveals life in all its aspects and all its details. Nor more could we invent the hell of modernity, since we had perfected our own between the late 16th century and the early 17th, with Tasso, Giordano Bruno, Galileo (and Caravaggio).

Some of the most influential and essential modern poets on the international stage, such as Baudelaire or Eliot, have helped us to understand the relationship between Dante's position and that of modern literature. But for Italian poetry and literature it has always been hard to draw a lesson from Dante and it could not be otherwise. The Italy of that time, even regardless of the poet's extraordinary work, was the centre and summit of the Christian Middle Ages. Throughout the last few centuries the centre and summit of modernity have been elsewhere.

Every literary culture that grows poorer, as ours has done, tends to turn its greatest authors into lifeless monuments. It deforms and disfigures them. It makes them at the very most catalogues of 'quote-worthy passages', as Contini observed. The majority of the Italian literary field could be envisaged as a ruined terrain with mutilated statues and dilapidated palaces. When oblivion, indifference or neglect were not the order of the day, we were allowed the nationalistic rehabilitation of the glorious figures of the fatherland: avenues and parks studded with absurd spectral busts. Every nationalism has its chamber of horrors. But Italian cultural nationalism was faced with onerous duties: it should have brought back to life a grand culture that had developed too early, several centuries before.

There is no Italian intellectual who represents better than Francesco De Sanctis the intimate bond that existed between national unity and literary tradition: his *Storia della letteratura italiana*¹ is a romantic masterpiece that was a cultural synthesis of the *Risorgimento* in the form of literary criticism. In it political unity, late in coming and fragile, is transformed into cultural unity in this story of Italian moral decadence (since for De Sanctis the Renaissance itself was nothing but corruption and moral breakdown). In order to emerge from decadence the solution could only be the objective unbiased study of reality (Machiavelli, Galileo, Vico). De Sanctis' moralism was a progress towards Reality: his idea of a 'modern national literature' turned to Zola's naturalism, a fusion of art, morality and science. It was an ambitious programme that basically came too late, just as political unity came late. Indeed some decades later Gramsci also faced this lack of organic living connection between 'literature and national life'. Unified Italy still needed to find the forms and the strength to maintain its difficult, artificial unity.

The work of ideological unification assumed a historico-rhetorical form with Carducci, via his myth of the 'simple peasant' and a Jacobinism with classical bookish touches; a pedagogical-pathetic form with De Amicis in the populism and patriotism of *Cuore*,² a book that, with the incredible force of propaganda, had an influence on behalf of an idyllic coexistence between rich and poor. On the other hand *Pinocchio*³ was both too fantastic and too mercilessly realistic to play on people's feelings and have a moralizing function; instead it represented the untamable side of natural tendencies and the incorrigible character of children (and Italians).

Unhappily fascism was not a mere accident of Italian culture. To different degrees irreconcilable intellectuals were fascists: D'Annunzio, Pirandello, Gentile, Marinetti, Ungaretti, Giovanni Ansaldo (who was first a friend of Gobetti, then became a fascist and friend of Ciano; but as he confesses on one page of his *Diary* from 1945, he was always anti-liberal and anti-democratic, always fascist at heart, even if at the outset he was shocked by Mussolini's crudeness and bad taste). Pirandello joined the party in 1924 and, while he had good relations with Mussolini himself, he always maintained a close link with the official culture. As for Gentile, he theorized the immediate unity between theory and praxis, the 'pure act', and in 1925 wrote his 'Fascist intellectuals' manifesto'. From 1922 he was minister of public education in Mussolini's government, joined the party in the following year, then headed the Institute of the Italian Encyclopedia and the Fascist Institute of Culture (in 1943 he came down in favour of the Salò republic and a year later was killed in Florence by partisans).

Marinetti (who was opposed to D'Annunzio in literary matters) was an interventionist, decorated during the war, an advocate of war as 'the only possible hygiene for the world'; he was an important figure in the regime and fell in with the Salò republic. Ungaretti began by siding with fascism, but in the end converted to Christianity (his first volume of poems in 1923 contained a preface penned by Mussolini).

*

As Norberto Bobbio noted, it is indisputable that fascism, which was then in power, destroyed a rich and varied culture of the right in Italy: but clearly that culture of the right had itself prepared the ground for fascism, which eventually swallowed it up. There were many liberal conservatives who took fright at socialism and communism and at first believed (as Benedetto Croce did) that fascism had a use, but in the end understood that it was in danger of destroying the foundations of the liberal state. The culture of 1945 was not only anti-fascist; it was also fed by the Resistance from a new generation that had grown up in fascist Italy: and not only by the opposition but also by the development of a new programme for a democratic society. The 'American myth' had a part to play too; from before the First World War its two chief promoters, who were rivals, had been Pavese and Vittorini. The idea of a free Italian literature arose, shorn of its heavy tradition, less elitist and esoteric, less anti-realist, in fact attractive to a much wider audience. The American myth was also the myth of the novel, a genre full of vitality, peopled by individuals who were actively seek-

ing themselves and others, thirsty for truth and hungry for reality. Thus, as opposed to the poetic language of hermeticism, there finally appeared, and was praised, the more realistic and communicative language of Saba, a poet who was able to speak of 'the whole of life' in verse.

Once again Italy wanted to grow and attain a modern rationality; but the most successful and memorable books of the 1930s and 1940s are still books dealing with the poverty of the peasants and their exclusion from history: Ignazio Silone's *Fontamara*⁴ and Carlo Levi's *Christ Stopped at Eboli*.⁵ They are anthropological works about Italy's under-development that were handed down to posterity because of worldwide under-development from which four-fifths of the human race have not managed to escape.

Later, in the mid-1950s, we moved on to observation, description, praise or condemnation of neo-capitalism. Italy went through a period of very rapid industrial development around 1958–63. For intellectuals it was a phase of extreme criticism: radical (and revolutionary) critique of the new relationship between capitalist production and social organization, new informal avant-gardes, rise of a Marxist New Left which turned a blind eye to the copious evidence against Stalinism.

A continuous spectacle

Does Italian culture exist? In recent years some profoundly discouraged voices have started to say no. In a country where democracy is a recent phenomenon and industrialization is just as recent, in a country where there seem to be no rules for community life, where cultural fashions from France or the USA obliterate overnight problems that seemed extremely important, it is not easy to understand what culture is.

Of course in a very broad sense, an 'anthropological' sense, as we say, the mafia and camorra are forms of culture too. Looking at Italy from afar, it could also be said that the behaviours concentrated in criminal form within the mafia and camorra are nevertheless spread everywhere in homeopathic doses and dominate the life of the country. Bonds of solidarity are becoming weaker, and corporatism and the aggressive self-defence of various 'tribes' are winning out over family or local loyalties.

It is true that as far as social behaviour is concerned the Italians are in a way barbarians. They have a pronounced social sense, but they sail 'by eye' without following a course and without a compass as if there had never been a pact or agreement that had to be obeyed. That is why Italian social life is extremely and obscurely complicated, and requires the expenditure of much energy and imagination. For instance, driving in Rome or Naples traffic jams may indeed be entertaining, but it requires an inclination for playing and competing that exasperates anyone who would prefer to see the use of the car as a less creative pastime. Is it a matter of culture? Maybe. In order to lead a more or less normal life in Italy you need to be continually and abnormally alert and cunning. From that viewpoint Italian creativity is an illusion, a bluff. It is merely the price you have to pay to survive in a society without rules, without getting in each other's way too much.

In the last 20 or 30 years rapid social changes and the development of mass com-

munications have brought about a radical transformation of attitudes and of the Italian cultural system. In the mid 1970s, shortly before he died, Pier Paolo Pasolini delivered a violent attack on television. The cultural instrument and channel, which many saw as having an instructional and democratic function, Pasolini thought of instead as an instrument of propaganda for the god of commerce, which disseminated on a vast scale a style of life based on consumption and was responsible for a kind of 'cultural genocide'. The past was condemned to be destroyed, memory was being wiped, as was that whole diversity of regional and class cultures and of minorities that had for centuries been a salient feature of Italy, which not even the fascist dictatorship had succeeded in destroying.

Many people criticized Pasolini for discovering and loudly publicizing things that were too familiar. German, American and French sociologists, cultural critics of every stripe, from Ortega to Marcuse, had already long since studied the irrational, obscurantist, manipulative effects of mass culture. It is true that in Italy these ideas, which could be found in books, had never been seen so powerfully acted upon. But then an unusual situation arose: after his death Pasolini was the focus of an unforeseen consensus that is still alive today. A sort of myth evolved around the poet and film-maker, who had been murdered by a *ragazzo di vita*⁶ in obscure circumstances at the very time when he was proclaiming, to general incomprehension, that a new fascism had arisen in Italy: far more powerful and sophisticated than its historical predecessor and therefore hard to pin down, since it was based on modernization and development, an (economic) development without (moral and political) progress.

Progressives, democrats, enlightened bourgeois were deluding themselves. They were still reasoning according to out-of-date schemas: democracy and dictatorship, fascism and anti-fascism, development and backwardness, progress and reaction. According to Pasolini the real situation was now quite different: the New Regime had no need of any ideology, not even a repressive one; consumer goods and the ubiquitous nature of their image were enough. It was only when the whole of society was 'officially recognized' as possessing the same '*petit bourgeois*' values and behaviour that it was possible to identify a veritable 'anthropological transformation' among the Italian people. They were no longer free citizens, or oppressed workers, or hypocritical, moralizing bourgeois, or conservatives, or progressives, but above all consumers. And the key cultural instrument of this New Power was then already television, in Pasolini's opinion.

People in Italy still occasionally wonder whether Pasolini was right, and how far. Recently even the best informed, most optimistic intellectuals, full of goodwill, those like Umberto Eco who are quite ready to accept the idea of a reasonable, encouraging pedagogy, are starting to revise their views. It is now clear that television is in danger of exercising a genuine dictatorship over the entire cultural system. It is not only a threat to poets, novelists, playwrights and actors, sophisticated intellectuals. Television is also encroaching further and further into the cinema's space and is in the process of affecting the mass circulation press, leaving it toothless.

During the last decade Italy has become culturally Televisionland: a country watching a non-stop spectacle that is somehow monstrous, grotesque, against which, as we now realize (rather late in the day), we have few critical defences. The book

programmes are often embarrassing and uninspiring, since they put over only one idea, saying that the best, quickest and most up-to-date way to discover books is neither to buy them nor to read them, but to see their covers on the screen and for two minutes watch their authors clumsily summarizing their content in a few words – quickly, please, ‘we’re running out of time’, and then we go over to the commercials.

We need to remember that in Italian history cultural life did not contribute much to the formation of a true democracy. In the end the Italians have invented only one thing in politics: fascism. Is that really an accident? Are we really over it? And fascism was not only a phenomenon caused by backwardness, far from it. It was also a response to backwardness. Mussolini’s was a charismatic, totalitarian mass regime that was quite ‘modern’ and (unlike Hitler’s) has continued to spread its lessons to other continents as well, to all those places where under-development has made large doses of populist nationalism and repressive control necessary in order to avoid agonizing class conflicts.

Furthermore, left-wing culture has over the last few years rather run out of steam. Pompously abstract philosophies are in the ascendant, and they clearly do not help the Italians think about empirical facts. The fashions that have grown up around Nietzsche and Heidegger, which French influence brought to Italy, a certain snobbish affectation for obscure allusive language, have once more prevented the development of a culture that is capable of analysing, describing and accounting for the workings of our country’s society. These are forms through which we see re-emerging our old idealism, our old tendency to separate words and actions.

To that we can add that Italy has never had a solid tradition of prose or drama that was able to present moral conflicts, whether private or public, with serious realism. We find it very difficult to understand what we truly are and what we are really doing. It is still true today that the best descriptions of Italy and the Italians often come from foreign observers, be they shocked or amused.

Granted that books like Carlo Levi’s *Christ Stopped at Eboli*, published in 1945, and Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa’s *The Leopard*,⁷ or Carlo Emilio Gadda’s *That Awful Mess on the Via Merulana*,⁸ which came out in 1957 and 1958 respectively, are still today instructive portraits of our history and identity. But then what? There are very few accounts of more recent modernized Italian society, and there is no work of comparable literary quality (Elsa Morante’s *La Storia*,⁹ from 1974, is a great epic work about Italy, but it deals with events that took place in the 1930s and 1940s; as for Paolo Volponi and Raffaele La Capria’s books, they are not known or read widely enough¹⁰).

Italo Calvino, who had a talent for talking about Italy, stopped doing so because he harboured a prejudice against realism; he went off to live in Paris, where he was always more fascinated by theories of narrative and became a prisoner of a literary genre that was absorbed in talking about itself. Leonardo Sciascia too eventually went down a similar road, putting over an image of Sicily and the mafia that was too sophisticated and ‘universal’, closer to the baroque than to the Enlightenment, ambitious as he was to become Italy’s mini Borges.

*

A culture should also be (I beg readers to forgive this metaphor, which is a little too redolent of the 19th century) the 'mirror' held up to a country's life. Unfortunately Italian culture is a mirror that always shows us as more beautiful than we are (and so consoles us), and a bit too deformed (and so makes us laugh). But maybe it would be more accurate to say that we have ended up in the hall of mirrors at a fair, where we have the illusion of always being on stage, always ourselves, a thousand times over, and that we cannot find the exit.

Alfonso Berardinelli

Rome

Translated from the Italian by Thierry Loisel

Translated from the French by Jean Burrell

Notes

1. F. De Sanctis (1971) *Storia della letteratura italiana*; new edn introduced by C. Milanese, Rome, Newton, 1991.
2. E. De Amicis (1892) *Cuore*; new edn, introduction and notes E. Barelli, Milan, Rizzoli, coll. 'Biblioteca universale', 3rd edn, 1984.
3. C. Collodi, *The Adventures of Pinocchio* (many English versions available including Oxford, 2002 and Walker Books, 2003).
4. I. Silone (1934) *Fontamara*, English translation by E. Mosbacher, London, Everyman, 1994.
5. C. Levi (1945) *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*, English translation, *Christ Stopped at Eboli*, by F. Frenaye, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1982.
6. A 'rent boy'. This is the title of a novel by Pasolini: *Ragazzi di vita*, 2nd edn, Turin, Einaudi, 1979; English translation, *The Ragazzi*, by E. Capouya, London, Paladin, 1989.
7. G. Tomasi di Lampedusa, *Il gattopardo*, English translation, *The Leopard*, by A. Colquhoun, London, Everyman, 1991.
8. C. E. Gadda, *Quer pasticciaccio brutto de via Merulana*, English translation, *That Awful Mess on the Via Merulana*, by W. Weaver, London, Quartet, 1985.
9. E. Morante, *La Storia*, English translation, *History*, by W. Weaver, London, Penguin, 2002.
10. Those that have been published in English translation are: P. Volponi, *The Memorandum (Memoriale)*, London, Calder & Boyars, 1967; *The Worldwide Machine (La macchina mondiale)*, London, Calder & Boyars, 1969; R. La Capria, *The Mortal Wound (Ferito a morte)*, London, Collins, 1984.