

BOOK REVIEW: *SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER FROM
MEDIEVAL TO MODERN ITALY*

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Jo Ann Cavallo and Carlo Lottieri (eds.): *Speaking Truth to Power from Medieval to Modern Italy*. Annali d'italianistica, 2016. ISBN: 0692794131.

IN AN AGE WHEN ACADEMIA is dominated (if not hijacked) by post-modernism, which tends to reduce discussions of power to shallow and ahistorical narratives of ‘oppressors vs. oppressed’, it would seem almost impossible to discuss the idea of power in depth and with sophistication. Yet the editors of (and at least some of the contributors to) the volume *Speaking Truth to Power from Medieval to Modern Italy* make an effort to wrestle the category of power away from the Foucauldian camp and use it as a tool to investigate state coercion and literary expressions of resistance against it. As Jo Ann Cavallo and Carlo Lottieri explain in the introductory chapter (which, however, takes aim more at Marxism than post-modernism), scholars have usually reduced the concept of power to economic and cultural processes. Instead, the editors of this volume wish to focus their attention on political power, its violent nature, and in particular, its most disturbing embodiment: the state. While Cavallo and Lottieri sketch and endorse the principles and epistemology of the Austrian school of economics, the other contributors to the book study the state within a broad array of philosophical and methodological frameworks. Nevertheless, Cavallo and Lottieri still claim that

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all the essays in the collection “accord well” with Austro-libertarianism (p. 24).

The volume is a collection of twenty essays, and it is hard to do justice to all the contributors and their chapters. Here I shall focus on only some of them, and then proceed to more general observations on the strengths and weaknesses of this collection. Surely it opens with two of its best essays. Zane Mackin’s chapter fleshes out the rhetoric of crisis in Dante’s writings, and in particular in the *Commedia*. The Florentine poet believed that the Church was experiencing a crisis in pastoral care because those who should have been preaching were not doing so. In this scenario of crisis, Dante claimed to have the right to preach, even at the cost of criticising the monopoly on preaching enjoyed by the clergy. This line of reasoning, ably reconstructed by Mackin, may sound familiar to those who are aware of, for example, the ecclesiological arguments of the Society of Saint Pius X. In the second essay, Steven Baker proposes an interesting reading of Petrarch’s letters, which reveal his consistent support for the values embodied by Cola di Rienzo’s regime, even at times when supporting such values was quite dangerous. In this case, since Petrarch simply wished to replace one political regime (albeit tyrannical and corrupt) with another, it is not quite clear what renders Baker’s analysis sceptical of political power per se, but at any rate, Petrarch’s tormented-yet-coherent views on the political problems faced by Rome and the Italian peninsula will be relevant for a variety of audiences.

In his essay on Antonio Cammelli’s tragedy *Panfila*, Matteo Bosisio skilfully guides the reader through a plot that denounces the corrupting influence of political power. In particular, Cammelli holds a negative view of the life at court, where love, loyalty, justice, and wisdom are impossible, and where one’s moral and personal liberty constantly face the problem of speaking truth to those who rule. Jo Ann Cavallo’s own essay is one of the most original and elegantly-written in the entire volume, as she uses various libertarian intellectuals (e.g. Mises, Rothbard, Lottieri, and Kinsella) to flesh out a series of fascinating themes in Sabadino degli Arienti’s novella “Triunfo da Camarino” (the first in his collection *Le Porretane*). Cavallo explicitly and successfully shows that Austro-libertarian theory is beneficial (and indeed necessary) for the study of the ideas of labor contract, self-ownership, and freedom of movement that were emerging in fifteenth-century Italy. Readers will find much food for thought especially in Cavallo’s ingenious discussion of pre-modern perceptions of privacy, already imagined and described as something threatened by the surveillance of those holding jurisdictional and political power. It is in this context that freedom of movement acquires meaning and (at least in Italy’s fragmented political landscape) effectiveness. There would be much to say concerning Cavallo’s less agreeable (actually,

quite puzzling) idea that arguments against the necessity of crusading were widespread but silenced in fifteenth-century Italy. Crusading was by then nothing less than a collective effort at self-defence and survival (though clumsy and surely polluted by petty political interests). This was, after all, the same peninsula terrorised by the 1480 Ottoman attack on Otranto, the same region that would be tormented for about three centuries by Islamic expeditions (usually from the Barbary coast) that massacred, enslaved, and impoverished the coastal populations of Southern Italy to the point of permanently changing the urban patterns and human geographies of those regions. I realise that the scholarship on this forgotten history is scarce, but reducing fifteenth-century crusading *merely* to selfish and political schemes will seem unconvincing to anyone who has read Michel Fontenay, Salvatore Bono, or, more recently, Massimo Viglione, and especially Robert C. Davis's seminal work *Christian Slaves, Muslim Masters: White Slavery in the Mediterranean, the Barbary Coast, and Italy, 1500-1800*.¹ Yet a thorough discussion of this important issue would require more space than I have here. Besides my caveat, Cavallo's essay remains commendable. Another essay that promises to make a dent in the current literature is Diletta Gamberini's much-needed reassessment of Benvenuto Cellini's character and actions. In particular, she uses the observations of Luigi Firpo to problematise the issue of self-censorship and stress the role played by fear in the author's decisions regarding the text to be published (a "scelta di tipo economico," footnote 20, p. 209). Gamberini then proceeds to compare two petitions written by Cellini addressing the Grand Duke, one to be passed on to him, and another, more outspoken one to be read only by his magistrates. This essay is a nuanced and much more credible reconstruction of Cellini's attitudes and self-conscious, complex strategies when facing political authorities. The only pity here is the lack of libertarian reflection on how the bureaucratisation of Renaissance states (to which Cellini himself contributed during his career) enhanced the arbitrariness of political power; Gamberini only mentions—too quickly—in her conclusion the ruler's "capacity to control dissent." (p. 216).

While every single essay in the book denotes scholarly research of the best quality (e.g., Laura Benedetti's chapter on "the impossible dialogue" between Torquato Tasso and Silvio Antoniano will simply have to be considered in every serious study on Tasso from now on), here I will only

¹ Salvatore Bono, *I Corsari Barbareschi* (Rome: ERI, 1964); Massimo Viglione, *La conquista della "mela d'oro." Islam ottomano e cristianità tra guerra di religione, politica e interessi commerciali (1299-1739)* (Solfanelli, 2018); and Robert C. Davis, *Christian Slaves, Muslim Masters: White Slavery in the Mediterranean, the Barbary Coast, and Italy, 1500-1800* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

comment on Elissa Weaver's and Marco Codebò's, before moving on to the modern part of the volume. Weaver's essay is at once an enjoyable introduction to the figure and writings of the seventeenth-century Venetian nun Arcangela Tarabotti and a multifaceted, interdisciplinary analysis of her most famous work, *Paternal Tyranny*. As explained by Weaver, in this book we find more than just a vigorous condemnation of the practice of forcing young girls to join monasteries. Tarabotti launches a mighty assault against all forms of misogyny, and she attacks the local Church, which failed to defend the God-given free will of young women such as herself. But, more interestingly, *Paternal Tyranny* constitutes also an open and devastating attack on the state, and in particular the political theory of "Ragion di Stato" (reason of state), which disregards moral obligations and endangers the salvation of souls (in this case, the salvation of women). Weaver does not overemphasise this point. Instead, she lets certain passages of *Paternal Tyranny* (such as the original dedication) speak for themselves, and then moves on to discuss the complex ramifications of early modern Venetian power structures, stressing Tarabotti's courage, her literary skills, and her significance for the field of women's history. This is doubtlessly one of the best essays in the collection.

Codebò proposes a well-written and interesting reflection on two overlapping themes in Alessandro Manzoni's *I Promessi Sposi* and *Storia della colonna infame*: the structures of power, and the exceptional act of defiantly challenging them by speaking the truth. Codebò has an impressive knowledge of Manzoni's text, and his use of Aldo Grasso's 1989 essay to decipher more fully the role of Lucia's character (and body) fits well in a discussion of early modern society, control, and liberty. The last section of the chapter, focusing on Gaspare Migliavacca and his faith, is undoubtedly one of the most brilliant pages in the entire volume. Yet, I must note that Codebò's decision to use Foucault for his theoretical framework is frustrating, at once unoriginal and disappointing. It is unoriginal because Foucault is currently the single most overrated figure in the entire world of academia, while in fact, as colourfully and liberatingly put by the ever-unafraid Camille Paglia:

The truth is that Foucault knew very little about anything before the seventeenth century and, in the modern world, outside France. His familiarity with the literature and art of any period was negligible. His hostility to psychology made him incompetent to deal with sexuality, his own or anybody else's. The elevation of Foucault to guru status by American and British academics is a tale that belongs to the history of cults. [...] The more you know, the less you are impressed by Foucault.²

² Camille Paglia, *Sex, Art and American Culture: New Essays* (Penguin, 1992), p. 174.

Further, Codebò's choice is disappointing, because, in a volume (supposedly) dedicated to libertarian literary theory, how much more well-reasoned, original and compelling his essay could have been if he had employed, instead of Foucault, Frederick Hayek, Murray Rothbard, Ayn Rand, or even simply Locke! The same theoretical and philosophical shortcoming is present in Valentina Nocentini's essay on the War in Libya. A libertarian reader (or *any* reader who takes the introduction to the volume seriously) will be dumbfounded to see how, even in a contribution focusing on war, the author picks Foucault as the theoretical guide, while anybody even remotely familiar with recent libertarian literature knows of more effective readings on the intrinsically aggressive and militarist nature of the modern state, such as Hans-Hermann Hoppe's.³

The last four essays of the volume are all excellent (Diana Garvin's chapter on the *mondine* is an absolute pearl), but here I will focus only on Maria Giménez Cavallo's work, before concluding with some general reflections. Giménez Cavallo recasts Elsa Morante's *La storia: romanzo* as a sophisticated and ideologically independent denunciation of the entire realm of sociopolitical power. Using Randolph Bourne's distinction between State and Country, Giménez Cavallo explains that "[a]lthough official history was generally regarded as a grand narrative focusing on the armed power of the State, Morante directs her attention instead to interconnected private lives, representative of the disenfranchised Country as a whole" (p. 429). After a section on posthumanism that is interesting but would require several historical and metaphysical corrections that are beyond the scope of this review, the author moves to discuss Morante's feminism and the role she assigns to children. Giménez Cavallo here qualifies and problematizes *La storia's* feminist themes, convincingly showing how Morante never privileges one gender over the other, but rather proposes motherhood as an antidote to violence and militarism. Giménez Cavallo does not spell this out, but I would note that this fascinating view of motherhood potentially opens up a whole new subject for libertarians and paleoconservatives interested in the natural order as a bulwark against the bureaucratic state and its present use for various projects of social engineering. Giménez Cavallo goes on to enlighten the role played by children in the world of Morante, where their innocence symbolizes an individualist spirit challenging modern statism. After looking at the theme of anti-authoritarian spirituality and religion, Giménez Cavallo

³ *In primis*, Hoppe's article "Banking, nation states, and international politics: A sociological reconstruction of the present economic order," *Review of Austrian Economics* (1990), vol. 4 issue 1, pp. 55-87; but also Idem, *From Aristocracy, to Monarchy, to Democracy: a Tale of Moral and Economic Folly and Decay* (Auburn, Alabama: Mises Institute, 2014).

closes the essay with its most striking and arguably most relevant sections, on “Anarchism” and “Death and Failure.” Here the author reconstructs the strategies chosen by Morante to condemn all forms and terminologies of power. While Giménez Cavallo decides to compare Morante’s views first with Murray Rothbard’s anarcho-capitalism and then with Mikhail Bakunin’s collectivist anarchism, in the end she concludes that Morante expressed a truly unique form of anarchism, centered around the link between motherhood and human consciousness, and characterized by a holistic denunciation of political institutions and their propaganda.

This volume represents an important contribution to the discussion of power and resistance to the state throughout Italy’s history. The fact that it is organised chronologically in six sections means that most of its readers will be free to jump to the subjects or periods in which they are most interested. A libertarian reader would probably appreciate more the essays contained in the second half of the volume, and in particular in sections 5 and 6. Here the expansion of government control and the coercive structure offered by the modern state to various narratives of power are very familiar, so that the literary critiques produced against them seem unavoidably more compelling. Nevertheless, what may be considered the main weakness of this exceptionally well-researched and in many cases ground-breaking collection of essays is precisely the fact that it does not live up to the expectations raised in the minds of Austro-libertarians (or any kind of libertarians) by the introduction. It is one thing for Cavallo and Lottieri to admit that many of the contributors to the volume do not follow in any way the Austrian school of economics; it is quite another to then discover that *almost none* of them do. For those who are not interested in the Austrian school, this is a forgettable flaw, but for those (like me) who hoped to see a libertarian framework applied with consistency to each of the different case studies, the reading of the volume becomes, in a sense, increasingly frustrating. I opened the volume hoping for a series of essays which followed the radically and unapologetically libertarian pattern of textual and historical analysis exemplified by the outstanding volume edited by Paul Cantor in 2009.⁴ But I was disappointed. I understand Cavallo and Lottieri’s clarification that the scholars contributing to the volume are “grounded in a variety of different traditions and methodologies” (pp. 24-25). But if there are almost no contributors using the Austrian terminology and analytical method, then why do they decide to dedicate a considerable part of the introduction to the Austrian school? Furthermore, while obviously it is not an easy task to find scholars familiar

⁴ Paul Cantor (ed.), *Literature and the Economics of Liberty* (Auburn: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 2009).

with the Austrian school in the field of literary studies, on the other hand, it would have been reasonable to stress to the contributors the necessity to at the very least engage in a systematic study of the state, as accurately and promisingly defined in the introduction. Yet, even this more modest expectation is confounded, and as a result the book lacks a truly cohesive theme. Notwithstanding this shortcoming and the other more limited and specific criticisms that I have raised above, the high quality of the essays is evident. Many of them are destined to become seminal, and some are truly outstanding and worth by themselves the price of the entire volume. For these reasons, this collection should be on the bookshelves of every serious scholar interested in any of the many topics treated—if not necessarily on the bookshelves of libertarian intellectuals eager to see a cohesive and systematic application of libertarian philosophy to literature and history. The latter, I am afraid, will still have to melancholically leaf through Cantor's great and unsurpassed endeavour, and wait a bit longer.