

## Introduction

The Italian filmmaker Michelangelo Antonioni's *La notte* captures the historical conditions of its moment with an incisive eye, indeed with an eerie prescience. Released in 1962, *La notte* depicts the discontent of a successful writer named Giovanni Pontano and his wife, Lidia. The action of the film begins on a day of celebration for the publication of his latest novel, the ominously titled *The Season*, and ends at dawn of the following day in the wake of an all-night party at the house of the Milanese industrialist Gherardini. As the party winds down to its conclusion, Gherardini, a member of the *nouveau riche* and a man with an astute grasp of the latest techniques of communication, offers Pontano a job as an executive in charge of telling the company's "story" to its employees. After refusing this proposition, the author departs with Lidia. As they wander away from the villa on foot, she reveals in conversation that she no longer loves him.

This final scene, however, is only the epilogue of a narrative that starts with the couple's visit to their friend Tommaso Garani, who is dying of cancer in a hospital. A colleague of Pontano and a former suitor of Lidia, Tommaso also enjoys the dubious distinction, in the milieu portrayed by the film, of being an Adorno scholar, whose latest article on the German philosopher Pontano praises in a passing remark. Translations of Theodor Adorno's writings, we should recall, began to appear in Italy in the mid-1950s and 1960s, starting with *Minima Moralia* in 1954. In roughly the same period, Silvio Berlusconi launched his career as a real estate developer in Milan, where he graduated from the Università Statale in 1961, raised the money for his first housing developments on via Alciani in 1962 and in

the suburb of Brugherio in 1964, and went on to build the enormous gated community of Milano 2 for a residential population of more than 10,000 in the 1970s.<sup>1</sup> By rapidly expanding his investments to cable television outlets such as Telemilano; the daily newspaper *Il Giornale*; Italy's largest publishing house, Mondadori; and a vast array of corporate assets in media, finance, advertising, insurance, and other industries through holding companies such as Fininvest and Mediaset, Berlusconi succeeded in establishing a solidly conservative "counter-counterculture." This ethos could not be regarded as "clerical-fascist," to invoke Pier Paolo Pasolini's term, in the manner of the Democrazia Cristiana but rather coincided with growing acceptance of the most spectacular forms of consumerism. For Pasolini, such an attitude of conformism or acquiescence to the sameness of mass society was the hallmark of the "anthropological mutation" that he analyzed brilliantly in the late essays collected in his books *Corsair Writings* (1975) and *Lutheran Letters* (1976).

My purpose in *After La Dolce Vita: A Cultural Prehistory of Berlusconi's Italy* is not to try to add to the already substantial literature analyzing Berlusconi's rise to power. Rather, I am interested in exploring how the leftist intelligentsia, the Giovanni Pontanos of Italy, managed in a few decades, and most decisively from the mid-1970s through the 1980s, to lose the position of intellectual and social centrality that was handed to them after the defeat of Fascism and the end of the Second World War. The unique potential of the left in the postwar period ensued from two factors. The first was the critical legacy derived from publication of the celebrated Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci's corpus of writings over several decades, most notably the *Letters from Prison* (Platone edition 1947; Caprioglio and Fubini edition 1965) and *Prison Notebooks* (Platone edition 1948–1951; Gerratana edition 1975). The second was the de facto cultural hegemony of the Partito Comunista Italiano (PCI) from the 1950s through the mid-1960s.

Already in 1966, it was possible for Pasolini to envision the left's allegorical death in his film *The Hawks and the Sparrows* by inserting footage of the funeral of Palmiro Togliatti, a founding member of the PCI with Gramsci in the 1920s and the leader of the party from 1927 until his death in 1964. The film further enlarges the allegory by concluding with the bathetic tableau of a talking crow, which spouts Marxist rhetoric, being killed and eaten by Totò and Ninetto. Even more thoroughly in the 1970s

and 1980s than in the day of Pasolini's requiem for the left, however, critical thought in Italy may be seen to have undergone a radical reorientation that made it possible, and even easy, for Berlusconi to become the purveyor of a new type of "national-popular" culture. As Alfonso Berardinelli points out in his preface to *Lutheran Letters*, Pasolini's jeremiads in his essays of the early to mid-1970s seem to have fallen on deaf ears and almost wholly to have been forgotten by the time of the so-called second economic miracle, which is to say the economic boom of the 1980s. A crucial cultural change took place, in other words, during the period that Massimo Panarari has dubbed "the long 1980s."<sup>2</sup> It was in fact the supposedly leftist Italian intellectual establishment that over this span of years prepared the way for Berlusconi's subsequent achievement of cultural and political hegemony.<sup>3</sup>

During the second economic miracle, Italy became the fifth largest industrial economy in the world. The anthropological mutation of the country that Pasolini decried in its incipient form in the mid-1970s had become by the end of the 1980s a *fait accompli*. In *After La Dolce Vita*, I criticize the development of this hegemonic order across the fields of film, literature, philosophy, and art criticism. Following the corruption scandals of 1992 that heralded the downfall of the Democrazia Cristiana and the Partito Socialista Italiano (PSI), Berlusconi's ascent to the office of prime minister in 1994 with the victory of his own party, Forza Italia, represented a seismic shift in the terrain of Italian politics. This upheaval could not have taken place without the squandering of its cultural capital by the Italian left, which until the end of the 1980s still retained a position of relative strength that it inherited from what was in the 1960s the largest Communist Party membership in Western Europe.

A number of commentators, including Alexander Stille, Perry Anderson, and Geoff Andrews, have observed that Berlusconi's monopolistic grip on the means of social organization has had a profoundly destructive effect on democracy in Italy. According to Stille, Berlusconi in effect conquered the nation twice: first on the cultural level through the media and then on the political level through the electoral process.<sup>4</sup> Yet little has been written about the specific ideological constellation revolving around the Italian appropriations of postmodernism and poststructuralism that helped to prepare Berlusconi's way.<sup>5</sup> As I argue in the chapters that follow, his conquest of Italian society was facilitated by intellectual contribu-

tions largely from the left: namely, the conservative belle-lettrism of Italo Calvino's *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, which aspires to resuscitate a literary aesthetics of taste; Gianni Vattimo's poststructuralist doctrine of weak thought; and Achille Bonito Oliva's art historical movement of *Transavanguardia*.

Since Berlusconi's first election to office, he has governed the country through center-right coalitions with only a couple of brief interruptions, benefiting from the power vacuum that resulted from the lack of an organized opposition to win the elections again in 2001 and 2008. As Anderson notes, Forza Italia was the first political party to be structured like a corporation; in fact, it was formed and managed by Publitalia, the marketing agency owned by Fininvest.<sup>6</sup> Following the entrenchment of Forza Italia in the political establishment, observers such as the *Financial Times* and the *Economist* recurrently have described Italy as an anomaly insofar as Berlusconi's ownership of the most important private television and publishing outlets, together with his hold on political office, has created an unbearable conflict of interest and concentration of power.<sup>7</sup>

In the immediate aftermath of the Liberation, which is to say the fall of Mussolini's régime at the end of the Second World War, power devolved to the Democrazia Cristiana and culture to the PCI, as Anderson remarks. At least through the 1960s, the Communist Party in fact exerted widespread influence by means of publishing houses, the writings and teachings of intellectuals, and the cinema: "At its height, the PCI could draw on an extraordinary range of social and moral energies, combining both deeper popular roots and broader influence than any other force in the country."<sup>8</sup> However, the standing of the left declined over the following decades not because power inherently trumps culture, but rather because the populist right competed aggressively in the cultural domain as a prelude to pursuing its ambitions in the political. More damagingly, from the mid-1970s through the end of the 1980s, the left itself failed to articulate an effective critique of the emerging forms of capitalism and mass media in Italy and thus neglected to pursue the sort of analysis that might have resulted in productive change.<sup>9</sup> The intellectual community was of little help in questioning the new social conditions because this group by and large occupied itself with debates in history, philosophy, and literature rather than in disciplines such as sociology or economics.<sup>10</sup>

In other words, there was almost no place in Italy for thinkers of

the Frankfurt School type. Not only were leftist critics unable to assess correctly the threat posed by mass culture, but for the most part they reiterated its triumphal view of consumerism. Leftist discourse in Italy, Carlo Freccero rightly points out, has withered to the point that it now plays by Berlusconi's rules.<sup>11</sup> To Freccero's point, it might be added that the capitulation of the left was in effect since well before the founding of Forza Italia. In defiance of a Supreme Court ruling that prohibited privately owned television stations from broadcasting nationally, Berlusconi successfully maneuvered in the early 1980s to establish a monopoly in private television under the protection of the leader of the so-called Socialist Party (i.e., the PSI) and then-prime minister, Bettino Craxi. Through the respective acquisitions of his two largest broadcast competitors, Italia 1 and Rete 4 in 1983 and 1984, Berlusconi dramatically expanded the corporate empire that eventually provided the base of operations for his political career.

If the populist consumerism of the right espoused by Berlusconi has set the terms of cultural discourse in the country, it has succeeded in doing so because in the 1980s the most prominent members of the ostensibly leftist intellectual class largely embraced the ideals of contemporary capitalism. The result was to deprive Italian society of the critical insights and vocabulary necessary to resist the forces of mass mediation and commodification. As Ernesto Galli della Loggia reminds us, thanks to its preoccupation with questions of individualism and familism, Italy has always been vulnerable to censure as a weak example of modernity, and not just in relation to industrial or technological problems. According to Galli della Loggia, whatever aspects of modernity in fact have been incorporated by the culture never acquired a truly Italian character, as they typically were direct appropriations of American lifestyles.<sup>12</sup> Yet there emerges in the 1980s a uniquely Italian brand of cultural currency that, in its most famous examples of Calvinian aesthetics, weak thought, and Transavanguardia, deliberately avoids any critical questioning of the dominant order of power and its relation to thought itself. The same certainly is not true, for example, of the philosophical contributions of Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, or Gilles Deleuze in the French context.

It may be true that the culture of the present day is identifiable with an ever-growing dependence on the technologies of mass communication and control. We should note nevertheless that certain modes of resistance

have come to the fore in recent decades, through the voices of women, minorities, and the colonized in world literature, art, and criticism. In Italy, however, we confront a way of thinking that enlists the jargon of postmodernism and poststructuralism in the service of a relentlessly consumerist, spectacular, acritical aesthetics. With few exceptions, postmodernism in Italy has been discussed mostly in terms of style (e.g., Umberto Eco's definition of postmodernism in relation to his own *The Name of the Rose*, Omar Calabrese's notion of the "neo-baroque," etc.) rather than in terms of, say, the specific cultural logic of the contemporary forms of capitalism à la Fredric Jameson. To understand Italian contemporary culture in a meaningful way, it is thus helpful to pay attention to the theoretical or conceptual frames of reference that have prevailed within different disciplines. In assessing the place of weak thought in the domain of philosophy, I will read Vattimo's project in relation to the strategies of poststructuralism, particularly as they have been elaborated in France. By contrast, I will examine Calvino's *ars poetica* of *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* and Bonito Oliva's art theory in the light of their respective reinterpretations of postmodernism, although as both the category itself and Calvino's and Bonito Oliva's uses of it are in different ways problematically mystificatory, I intend to invoke the term sparingly and with some skepticism.<sup>13</sup>

Postmodernism, in other words, will not be granted in these pages any a priori synthetic or explanatory power as a theory. My goal is not to decide whether certain thinkers are "truly" postmodern or not, but rather to understand how some of the most important figures of the once-leftist intelligentsia in Italy came to celebrate the logic of the market, to enjoy in strikingly similar fashion the performative mobilization of the cultural ideals of sweetness, lightness, weakness, and softness.<sup>14</sup> Constant rehearsal of these terms has given rise in the country to a mind-set that is fundamentally hostile to the very notion of criticism. The triumph of this "anti-Frankfurt School" of discourse, as it might be called, has precipitated in turn the cultural defeat of the left, whose former hegemonic status (albeit mostly limited to high culture) had produced some genuine political gains in the 1970s.<sup>15</sup> By now it has become conventional to dismiss the idea that structure produces superstructure, particularly under the conditions of the so-called new economy, which supposedly values knowledge above all other commodities. However, the relevance of the "Italian case," as several critics from Carla Benedetti to Romano Luperini

have recognized, consists precisely in the extent to which the culture's media-driven metamorphosis helped to consolidate Berlusconi's base of political power in the 1990s.<sup>16</sup>

From a certain perspective, my book may be viewed as something of an update of Giacomo Leopardi's treatise *Discourse on the Present State of the Customs of the Italians* (1824), in which he proposes a comparative analysis of the diverse conditions of modernity of European societies at the time of the birth of capitalism. Like Leopardi, I am interested in exploring Italy's public virtues and cultural forms of life at least to some degree in comparison with those of other Western societies, particularly France, at the time of the triumph of poststructuralism and postmodernism. A legendary pessimist, Leopardi concluded that, unlike the other nations of Europe, Italy lacked a "tight society," by which he meant an open, thriving, and ethically active civil society, where intellectually productive discussion would allow mutual understanding between discrete viewpoints to occur. Instead, the superficial distractions of strolling, spectacles, and churches in his opinion had come to dominate the entire life of the country. Of course, I do not wish to suggest that Italian mores have remained the same since Leopardi's day. However, I would contend that in Italy today we encounter a crippling deficiency of democratic and cultural life that in some sense represents the metastasis of the problem that Leopardi so cogently diagnosed. On a related note, it is no wonder that Mastrantonio and Bonami have argued that in contemporary Italy the society of spectacle has replaced civil society.<sup>17</sup>

To Agamben's observation that tragedy is not an Italian category, one thus might add that neither is criticism.<sup>18</sup> Since at least Dante's decision to call his masterpiece a comedy, we Italians have been convinced of the epistemological privilege of the comic and the need to renounce the tragic perspective. At the risk of swimming against the tide and of reminding readers of the litany of historical tragedies that Italy has endured since the Second World War, from Fascism to the violence of the Mafia and the terrorist acts of the extreme left, I wish to reflect in *After La Dolce Vita* on the nation's cultural conditions during the so-called *anni di bambagia* or "years of the cotton ball" from the mid-1970s through the 1980s, a period that immediately followed and to some extent overlapped with the *anni di piombo* or "years of lead," which were mordantly so named because of the prevalence of terrorist violence at the time. My intention is not to fos-

ter a sort of Spenglerian *Kulturpessimismus* about Italy, a country that from Antonio Negri to Giovanni Arrighi has given rise to the most critical approaches to globalization, as Anderson has remarked. It may be argued after all that, since the significant accomplishments in the Western world of social welfare, civil rights, and economic equality through the beginning of the 1970s, the international political left seems merely to have fallen asleep for a couple of decades.<sup>19</sup> Yet in Italy the traditional network of alliances between the various constituencies of the family, labor unions, educators, etc. that make up civil society, engagement of which was Gramsci's cultural and political objective throughout his life, has unraveled in an especially dramatic and rapid fashion. In this respect, the nation's intellectual life has been the key to the historical process. Italian poststructuralism has centered neither on the more promising notion of difference à la Derrida nor on those of archeology, genealogy, and problematization à la Foucault, but rather on the intellectual litotes of "weakness." Notwithstanding Vatimo's belated political career and recent political conversion, this theoretical school consequently has shown nothing but indifference to questions of social inequality or justice and has managed to dissolve the critical capital of the greatest Communist Party in Europe.

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Italy is "not a normal country," to cite Geoff Andrews, and indeed it represents something of an extreme-limit case with respect to the degradation of contemporary cultural and political conditions. Perry Anderson has suggested that Gramsci's insistence in the *Prison Notebooks* on the importance of hegemony as a cultural consensus to be achieved through the operations of civil society made it possible to think of the rebirth of Italy in cultural rather than economic or political terms. Hegemony thus was a consoling thought for a nation dominated for centuries by foreign powers, yet ennobled by its cultural inheritance. Gramsci reinforced his thinking on hegemony by means of the principle of the "national-popular," meaning an ethos that would abandon Italy's elitist and spiritualist traditions to imagine more vital, democratic, and unconventional forms of life. Yet at the moment of the triumph of mass media in the 1980s, Gramsci's concepts proved useless to the left as tools of resistance and may be said to have transformed into their perverse doppelgängers under Berlusconi's influence.

In *After La Dolce Vita*, I set out to show how Italy has failed to live up to the dream of a culture that responds to the life of the political collective as a whole, including such typically disempowered groups as the poor. What Italy has achieved instead of this Gramscian ideal is a society subjugated at every level to the benumbing power of the mass media.

The book consists of four chapters, titled “Sweetness,” “Lightness,” “Weakness,” and “Softness.” I argue that these four nouns name the coordinates of contemporary Italian culture under the condition of “integrated spectacle,” to invoke Guy Debord’s term. Debord introduces this concept in *Comments on the Society of Spectacle* to designate what happens when spectacle becomes a totalizing form of life. Indeed, he argues that only in Italy was this phenomenon fully achieved, thus attributing to the nation a unique symbolic position. Remarkably, he arrived at this conclusion even before Berlusconi’s election to Parliament and the prime ministership in the 1990s.

Sweetness, lightness, weakness, and softness function in the Italian context as key tropes of belonging and self-identification. The terms constitute the linguistic basis for the ideological reimagination of a country that is dominated by consumerism and identified with the label “Made in Italy.” The four categories delimit the “good temperament” of the typical Italian in accordance with a cliché idea of national identity. Perhaps not surprisingly, given its stubborn persistence into the present, this stereotype has deep historical roots and the generally uncontroversial status of received wisdom. In this connection, we might recall Nietzsche’s blithe declaration in *Human, All Too Human* that the Italian exhibits “a secure, mild, and basically cheerful soul.”

Cinema, which at first glance might be regarded as one of the media most vulnerable to spectacularization, has given life in Italy to some of the most exemplary critiques of the status quo, from the films of Neorealism to those of Fellini and Moretti. In “Sweetness,” I examine the hostility that Fellini encountered during the production and distribution of his last motion pictures. The chapter focuses in particular on *Ginger and Fred*, which elaborates a bitter appraisal of Berlusconi’s brand of media empire building. Financiers and critics turned against the celebrated director of *La dolce vita* when he stopped offering a mythical narrative that glamorized the country’s spectacular life. Moreover, the sharp political attacks that Fellini mounted against the cable television industry, presided over by Berlusconi,

continue to meet with utter lack of recognition from commentators in Italy and the United States, despite the historical record of the director's three separate lawsuits against the media tycoon. I question this silence regarding Fellini's project in the face of the critical challenge of his last works as exemplified by *Ginger and Fred*. Whereas the later chapters of my book tell the disheartening story of the surrender of the Italian left to the logic of the market, this first chapter provides a contrasting example of creative acuity and courage in Fellini's resistance to Berlusconi during the 1980s. Although the director was never a member of the Communist Party, his awareness of the severity of the intellectual corruption spreading through society at the time makes his final productions, especially *Ginger and Fred*, representative of a cinema of critique that had been a saving grace of Italian culture since the days of Neorealism.

The next chapter explores the problematic of lightness, the first and symbolically most important of the values that Italo Calvino identified in *Six Memos for the New Millennium* as relevant for contemporary society (lightness, rapidity, exactitude, visibility, multiplicity, consistency). Of the cases explored in these pages, Calvino's is certainly the most complicated. Although he began his career in the mid-1940s as a member of the PCI and as an author of realist fiction who was committed to exploring Italy's social and political problems in the post-War era, he gradually withdrew from this position and by the early 1960s had become an advocate for the idea that literature ought to be "predictable and reassuring," to cite his own words. Yet he continued to be troubled by the degrading influence of the mass media until the end of his life. Unlike Vattimo or Bonito Oliva, then, Calvino betrays a deeply ambivalent, even anguished, sense of his own role as an intellectual. At the same time, he becomes so vehement in his rejection of his youthful leftism that, as the culmination of a kind of immunodeficiency, he appears to incubate within himself the virus of Italy's cultural demise, what Luperini memorably terms "the luxury of lightness." In his final testament of *Six Memos*, Calvino sadly assumes the position of a narcissistic censor proselytizing for his own belletrist tastes. Precisely because he bemoans in this treatise the debilitating effects of consumer culture, his found antidote of a literature of style that celebrates its own removal from all social meaning remains in the end deeply unsatisfactory.<sup>20</sup> Certainly his choice of "lightness" as the defining signifier of his poetics, in its facile generality of reference and, thanks

to Milan Kundera, modishness at the time, exemplifies the complicity of high culture with the bourgeois mentality of Berlusconiism. Indeed, lightness arguably becomes as a result the favorite buzzword of Italy's spectacularized culture, encompassing and reinforcing the narrower valences of several other key terms: "weakness," which Vattimo deploys interchangeably with lightness; "softness," with which Bonito Oliva evokes the charm of a mollifying formalism; and, as Zygmunt Bauman points out, a whole vocabulary of "liquidity."<sup>21</sup> Above and beyond its meaning with respect to specific stylistic choices, "lightness" in other words enacts the principle of equivalence intrinsic to the operations of exchange value, thus encapsulating the logic of the market at its purest.<sup>22</sup>

The shortcomings of Calvino's poetics become manifest in his weirdly optimistic reading of Kafka's short story, "The Bucket Rider." Kafka's narrative concludes with the image of the protagonist floating in a levitating bucket past a nearby range of "ice mountains" because his neighbors have refused to fill his bucket with coal. Calvino reads this harrowing ending as a celebration of the magical power of flight. He thus ignores Kafka's insistence on the social exclusion and banishment of the protagonist, an emphasis that moved Walter Benjamin to remark, "There is no more hopeless vista than that of 'the regions of the ice mountain' in which the bucket rider drops out of sight forever." By fixating on the fantastic dimensions of Kafka's writing, Calvino upholds in *Six Memos* the conservative notion of literature as a "purely" aesthetic phenomenon. Consequently, he fails to acknowledge what Jacques Rancière has called the politics of aesthetics, the logical consequence that, as a distribution of the sensible, aesthetics necessarily entails politics, albeit while assuming a relation to the political that may very well be oblique or complex. Invoking the values of lightness, exactitude, and visibility, Calvino reanimates a dead concept of beauty and retreats from the ideal of the sublime associated with an experimental modernism. He promotes a postmodernism that, to borrow a phrase from Frederic Jameson's *Valences of the Dialectic*, "gives the illusion of substance in its absence."

Calvino is in this respect an illustrative figure. After the Liberation, he moved and worked in the ambit of leftist intellectuals such as Cesare Pavese, Alberto Moravia, Pasolini, Luchino Visconti, etc., who tended to affiliate themselves with the PCI. Over the years, he trained an increasingly Voltairean skepticism on traditional communist dogma and

gained international fame as the preeminent Italian novelist of his generation, while adhering to the view that literature is a game thoroughly divorced from social and political considerations.<sup>23</sup> Before formalizing this divorce in *Six Memos*, however, Calvino lived briefly in Paris and met regularly with Giorgio Agamben during the period when Calvino had begun to reflect on lightness and Agamben on the questions that led to his own theory of bare life. From 1974 to 1976, Calvino, Agamben, and Claudio Rugafori undertook together to identify the fundamental categories of thought and experience as part of an unrealized plan to begin publishing a new journal that they envisioned covering the most urgent critical issues of their day. Rugafori started his share of the exercise with *architecture* and *vagueness*, Calvino with *speed* and *lightness*, and Agamben with *tragedy* and *comedy*, *biography* and *fable*, and, most importantly, *law* and *creature*.<sup>24</sup> The last pair of categories inaugurates the understanding that it is precisely when stripped of our rights under the law that we arrive at degree zero of the “human creature,” which is to say the point of “bare life.”<sup>25</sup> This intuition in turn is the kernel of the genealogical and biopolitical reflections that twenty years later Agamben brings together in his landmark *Homo sacer*.

For Italy, the collective endeavor of Rugafori, Calvino, and Agamben thus amounts to a strategic crossroads from which one of the culture’s seminal figures sets forth on a path of aestheticized belle-lettrism, while another pursues the course of a reenergized, if problematic, relationship to the political. Notwithstanding his triumphs as an author of fiction, the politics of Calvino’s aesthetics is often troubling and never more so than in *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, where his ambivalence toward mass culture is channeled not into a productive and critical dialectic but rather into articulation of a poetics that too readily affirms the procedures of contemporary capitalism and its values of lightness, multiplicity, and speed.

In the third chapter, “Weakness,” I assess the reception of poststructuralism in Italy by considering Gianni Vattimo’s philosophy of “weak thought” (*pensiero debole*). His work makes clear the acritical and antipolitical bias of hegemonic thought in Italy relative to French philosophy as exemplified by Derrida, Deleuze, and Foucault. Although critics often deride *pensiero debole* as merely a symptom of “the long 1980s,” no one has offered a clear account of how the claims of this theoretical school to increase freedom and reduce violence compare to the critical impact of Derrid-

ean deconstruction. Like the French poststructuralists, Vattimo may take Nietzsche and Heidegger as sources of inspiration, but by its author's own admission the strategy of weak thought fundamentally consists in exalting exchange value. Criticism indeed has no place in Vattimo's methodology (including criticism of Heidegger's politics, for example), as he aims to replace critical thinking with a conservative revival of the hermeneutic tradition. If Vattimo's official goal is to undermine epistemological certainty, his unconscious one is to produce the kind of nihilism favorable to unbridled capitalism, notwithstanding the politics supposedly evinced by his election in 1999 to the European Parliament as a member of the *Democratici di Sinistra* and his late conversion to Marxism in 2004. Of course, it may be true that we criticize the society of exchange value only at our own peril insofar as envisioning an alternative state of things nowadays often seems impossible. Yet it is hard to see how reducing the world to exchange value has resulted in anything more than increased suffering. If we really wish to redeem capitalism, as Bernard Stiegler suggests, a radical new ecology of values, media, and mass culture is needed. This is the challenge for leftist thought today, a challenge that Italian intellectuals mostly have preferred to evade in order to look "more modern than all the moderns," if we may cite Pasolini's turn of phrase with the appropriate dash of irony.

Hostile readers who wish to assign to poststructuralism the responsibility for an ever-lengthening list of present-day ills, from cultural relativism to the death of the subject, are by now overly familiar voices. Richard Wolin echoes the general tone of outrage: "As intellectual solvents, deconstruction and Foucauldian genealogy are too effective for their own good. By the time they are through working their magic and casting their spells, all trace of substantiality has been eliminated."<sup>26</sup> *Pace* Wolin, I contend throughout *After La Dolce Vita*, and especially in the chapter on Vattimo's ideology of weak thought, that French poststructuralism as exemplified chiefly by Derrida, Foucault, and Deleuze maintains a sense of critical purpose by persisting at all times in questioning the operations of power, including the corporate power of capitalism.<sup>27</sup> On this score, French philosophy ought to be distinguished from its Italian counterpart, which on the whole has worked to validate the status quo of contemporary mass society.

Over the course of numerous books, including *Weak Thought*, *The End of Modernity*, and *The Transparent Society*, Vattimo espouses a nihil-

ist theory of postmodernism. More specifically, he calls on his readers to withdraw from foundationalist strategies and welcome the drift of endless interpretation in the wake of Nietzsche's announcements of the death of God in *The Gay Science* and of the transformation of the true world into a fable in *The Twilight of the Idols*. At the same time, he insists on total dissolution of history as a consequence of Jean-François Lyotard's definition of postmodernity as the end of historical metanarratives. The most crucial reference for Vattimo, however, is Heidegger's philosophy of Being, whose terminology and logic he accepts in all their metaphysical splendor. In addition, he rereads Foucault's promising notion of an "ontology of actuality" in a shallow, pseudo-Heideggerian direction.

Unlike, say, Derrida, Vattimo does not feel the need to criticize notions such as Spirit or Being, preferring to cite or "correspond" with Heidegger's notions regarding the end of metaphysics and the *Ereignis* of technology rather than to scrutinize their meaning. Vattimo likewise never questions Heidegger's political beliefs. Far from representing a less phallogocentric way of thinking, weak thought in this light seems to epitomize the wish for a totalizing system of logic. Whereas deconstruction revolves around philosophical and performative strategies of problematization, around posing difficult questions, nothing of this sort is at stake for weak thought. Derrida declared his refusal to embrace Lyotard's definition of postmodernity in *Échographies*. Moreover, he decisively redefined the philosophical and political stakes of deconstruction through concepts such as "democracy to come" and "justice in particular" in his later works, beginning with *Specters of Marx*. It is no accident, then, that unlike Vattimo Derrida reflects on technology and the role of the media with care, starting with a questioning of names and concepts that refuses to accept neutral-sounding or conventional terms such as "means of communication" and that deliberately invents idiosyncratic terms such as "teletechnology" to call attention to the strangeness of the technological *per se*.

If Derrida does not adopt an apocalyptic tone when it comes to this domain, nevertheless he makes clear his awareness of the autoimmune threat of teletechnology (the possibility that it might become what Deleuze, at the end of his life, called the society of control. Vattimo by contrast looks at contemporary technology as a magical gateway to greater freedom and tolerance. Whereas deconstruction aims to suggest the possibility of the impossible, weak thought may be said to conform to the

possibility of the possible, relentlessly apologizing for what already is. The chapter ends with an examination of Vattimo's recent confession, *Ecce comu* (2007), in which he reneges to a degree on the pledges of his earlier writings and explains his eleventh-hour return to communist politics in terms of a rediscovery of religious faith.

In the epilogue, "Softness," I analyze the rhetoric of Achille Bonito Oliva's writings on *Transavanguardia*, a movement that encompasses well-established painters such as Francesco Clemente, Sandro Chia, Enzo Cucchi, and Mimmo Paladino. Bonito Oliva has helped to market this movement internationally as a recuperation of the softness of sentimental, figurative subject matter. Not to leave any doubt about the implications of his position, he states in one of his most important essays, "The Achieved Nihilist," that "softness here signals an eclectic identity with no need for strong presence in the social." He makes copious use of the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, interpreting their ideas in an exaggeratedly "vitalist" register in order to dissolve the resistant political project embedded in their thought. This rhetorical gambit exemplifies a central strategy of the establishment of hegemonic Italian intellectuals, which is to adopt the anti-essentialist vocabulary of poststructuralism while divesting it of critical and political meaning. The key signifiers that constitute the subject of my book thus often seem interchangeable in their cultural deployment. For example, Vattimo recurrently defines weak thought as a "lightening" of the metaphysical structures of Being, whereas Bonito Oliva characterizes *Transavanguardia* in his own words as "a sweet project," promoting the comforts of rediscovered lightness in contrast to the ponderousness of critical difficulty and complication. Vattimo and Bonito Oliva cite *ad libitum* exactly the same, narrow repertory of passages from Nietzsche.

Not surprisingly, Vattimo makes Adorno and the thinkers of the Frankfurt School into favorite targets of his polemic. He repeats throughout his writings that Adorno's apocalyptic prophecies regarding the media-driven culture of sameness have not come to fruition in a world dominated by subcultures, thanks precisely to the ubiquity of the media. However, in the light of Berlusconi's advance from a fortune in real estate to control of the nation's presses and broadcast outlets and ultimately to abuse of political power to exempt himself from the law, Italy seems as though it may be exactly the wrong setting in which to complain about the limits of Adorno's critique of the culture industry. Moreover, after thirty years

of Italy's cultural and political decadence, there has been no real effort at self-criticism by those who helped to usher in the new era.<sup>28</sup> Although Vattimo published *Ecce comu* in a bid to draw attention to his triumphal return to leftist engagement, he astoundingly tries to position this return in philosophical continuity with the principles of weak thought, as I show in my analysis of his argument. As for Bonito Oliva, he seems happy to continue polishing his reputation for aesthetic eclecticism, as Mastrantonio and Bonami have remarked, by maintaining the pretense that culture is in a state of perennial transavant-gardism.<sup>29</sup>

Although a somewhat bleak picture of the landscape may emerge from these pages, my desire is not at all to suggest that in Italy we have had no critical minds who might be counted on to elaborate an alternative cultural vision. Pasolini might almost suffice on his own to equalize the field of battle. Anderson is quick to recognize Antonio Negri and Giovanni Arrighi for their trail-blazing critiques of globalization in Negri's *Empire*, authored with Michael Hardt, and Arrighi's *Chaos*.<sup>30</sup> Giorgio Agamben and Roberto Esposito have been exploring important questions in the field of biopolitics with a critical, and in Agamben's case perhaps even apocalyptic, sense of urgency. Working in Negri's and Agamben's wake, Paolo Virno has diagnosed incisively our current forms of life and struggles with the "affects" of capitalism from cynicism to skepticism. In a pamphlet entitled "The Italian Difference," Negri himself identifies three of the most crucial contributors to Italian political thought, in Gramsci, the theorist of workerism Mario Tronti, and the feminist philosopher Luisa Muraro, who calls for a new "thinking of difference."<sup>31</sup> Negri finds particularly inspiring the ability of each of these thinkers to conjugate theory and praxis while placing emphasis on praxis.

However, the constellation of cultural productions that I examine in *After La Dolce Vita* clearly has come to provide in recent decades the hegemonic image of Italian culture both for Italy and for other nations. Even if it were true that figures such as Negri and Agamben have achieved wider recognition in the United States than in Italy, these thinkers have never been welcomed among either nation's readership with the same warmth as Vattimo or Calvino, who increasingly seem to exemplify a type of contemporary Italian culture that is beloved by Italian and foreign admirers chiefly for the qualities of being salutary, accommodating, and soft.<sup>32</sup> The plea for nonjudgmental forms of criticism in this context strikes me as a luxury

that historical realities honestly do not permit. In writing this book, I have often pondered Foucault's expressed wish in "The Masked Philosopher" to dream of a criticism that would not judge but rather bring a book, a sentence, an idea to life. Although the limits of critical analysis may be all too clear, it nevertheless seems to me possible to keep meaningful ideas alive while judging well the questions that demand a cogent response.