

BOOK REVIEWS

Contro il materialismo, by Pierpaolo Antonello, Turin, Nino Aragno Editore, 2012, xxxviii + 408 pp., €22.00 (paperback), ISBN 978-88-8419-559-3

Contro il materialismo is a long excursus on the reception of science and technology in twentieth-century Italy and an attempt to explain why they have been substantially marginalised by national political and cultural programmes. The work focuses on literary and philosophical fields, reflecting the author's own expertise. Antonello employs a dialectical scheme in which philosophies like idealism, materialism and structuralism are examined for the way in which they shaped an idea of science and consequently a certain epistemology in Italy. The progression of chapters follows a chronological and conceptual order since they also deal with synchronic subjects such as the treatment of scientific issues by Fascism, positivism and journals like *La Voce* and *La Ronda*.

One of the book's basic ideas is that, at the beginning of the twentieth century, fears of positivist determinism in Italy exacerbated spiritualist and irrationalist tendencies inherited from German idealism. In addition, the national hegemony of Crocean philosophy excluded every possible approach to contemporary Anglo-American materialist thought. As a result, Italian culture has been subjected to humanistic thinking for all the past century, meaning that in national pedagogy humanistic studies are still considered gnoseologically superior to scientific knowledge. For Antonello, the Italian case is a reflection of the general approach of European philosophy towards science and technology. At the start of the last century the growing feeling of crisis and alienation caused by the modern age was attributed to science and materialism, so that most Italian philosophy developed in contrast to this kind of knowledge. This view was restated in mid-century in Italian 'letteratura industriale'.

The study also sheds light on the political roots of this opposition. Croce's resistance to a dialectical discussion on science seems to have been caused by his ideological opposition; later on, Italian Marxist opposition to science was explicitly motivated by the symbolic correspondence of science and technology with post-war American capitalism.

The consequence of this secular juxtaposition between the 'two cultures' was the decline of the critical and epistemic dimension of scientific research in Italy and the occasional celebration of its instrumental and pragmatic dimension. It constituted (and constitutes) a severe problem in so far as scientific and technological progress is not based only on practical application but also on basic research. Unfortunately, few intellectuals understood the importance of the epistemic contribution of science to an organic culture.

Antonello also highlights the role of scientists in this situation, since they adopted a line of disengagement and few took part in public discourse to defend their particular knowledge. There were, however, some exceptions: the physicist Antonio Garbasso, for example. Antonello also mentions practical attempts to reconcile the 'two cultures', such as Leonardo Sinisgalli's journal, *La civiltà delle macchine*, which at least in its early issues successfully managed to integrate scientific and humanistic contributions.

Contro il materialismo ends with some considerations on the postmodern era and its implications. According to Antonello, present relativism encourages a bottom-up model of

culture that contrasts with past decades and constitutes a positive change with regard to technological-scientific knowledge given the wider population's interest in and less prejudiced attitude towards technology. Another novelty is that scientific topics seem now to be at the centre of public discourse and debate, even if they are often controversial, and they are discussed by those who previously neglected them, for example Marxist and Catholic intellectuals. In this way, the book concludes on an optimistic note regarding future Italian culture.

Antonello presents a complex subject in a comprehensible way and – despite a surfeit of typographical errors – the book reads well. In this sense Antonello achieves one of his basic aims: to write a work that can be understood by the non-specialist. (That said, some concepts *would* require preliminary knowledge in order to be fully understood, for example the difference between naturalistic and historical materialism.) He examines a wide range of explicit and implicit opinions with regard to the 'two cultures' issue, including the ambiguous position of Pirandello, who endorsed spiritualist ideas but employed epistemic solutions developed by contemporary science in his works, and the ideas of the Futurists, whose irrationalist programmes clashed with their public claims in favour of technology. The book also includes an illuminating analysis of twentieth-century Italian Marxism, with special regard to the efforts of Marxist intellectuals to justify with social science what could be more easily explained by natural science. In sum, this is a rich and interesting work.

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Excavating Modernity: The Roman Past in Fascist Italy, by Joshua Arthurs, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 2012, xiii + 216 pp., \$45.00, ISBN 978-0-8014-4998-7

In this fascinating and meticulously researched work, Joshua Arthurs explores the meaning, purpose and consequences of *romanità* – 'romanness' – in Fascist Italy and the nature of the relationship between the regime and leading historians, classicists and archaeologists, particularly those connected to the influential *Istituto di Studi Romani* (ISR). Arthurs (rightly) argues that Fascism's obsession with *romanità* can only be properly understood within the context of its revolutionary and modernising project to transform Italy and Italians. In this sense, Arthurs firmly aligns himself with recent 'anti-anti-Fascist' revisionism, which sees Fascism as a set of ideas to be taken seriously, a genuinely revolutionary ideology based around the 'core myth' of national rebirth.

How could Fascist *romanità*, which concentrated almost exclusively on the glories and monumental remnants of ancient Rome (the history and architecture of the intervening centuries between the fall of Rome and the rise of Fascism were effectively ignored), serve revolutionary and modernist ends? As Arthurs shows, ancient Rome stood as an inspiration and model for the regime's plans for the modernisation of the capital and its broader ambitions to