

## A brief ideological history of Italian psychology

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**ABSTRACT.** – The aim of this paper is to trace a brief and partial ideological history of Italian psychology. The use of the term ideological wishes to highlight the inextinguishable link between a system of thoughts and values and the community or social group to which this system refers. In accordance with this perspective of cultural relativism, I propose to discuss three specific moments in the history of Italian psychology: the influence of Gentile thought up to the racial laws; the university reform that confirmed the (Gentilian) rift between natural and social sciences; the polarization of the recent debate on issues such as professional policies and gender identity. The thesis I try to defend is that the history of Italian psychology is characterized by a strongly dualistic thought, which has influenced its scientific development and the possibility of offering practical implications in civil society. While aware of the limits of such a partial reflection, I conclude by suggesting the need to recover a relational perspective on science and society.

*Key words:* history of psychology; neoliberalism; neo-idealism; dualism; ideology.

### An ideological history

According to many historians and philosophers of science, it is impossible to distinguish a scientific perspective from the historical and ideological context in which it emerged. In a nutshell, we see what our systems of meanings allow us to see. An ideology is, in fact, a system of beliefs, opinions, representations, values that exists insofar as it is inscribed in a biunivocal relationship between that same system and a given social group. This biunivocal relationship is therefore organically functional, insofar as it is an attempt (implicit and/or explicit) by a group to direct its actions to respond to community purposes or needs.

Interestingly, this relativistic, functional, and relational perspective can be found in both cultural anthropology and evolutionary biology. In order

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to understand a system of ideas and values, the anthropologist needs to carry out a functional analysis of the 'relationship between a cultural performance and a human need' (Malinowski, 1960, p. 39), assuming on the one hand, an exchange between these two poles of the relationship, and on the other hand, a binding effect of the relationship itself. The needs of a group give rise to specific meanings and those same meanings will guide subsequent choices. A cultural system is, in some ways, analogous to a genotype, and cultural transmission and learning are analogous to mating and breeding from the perspective of evolutionary biology (Boyd & Richerson, 1985). Each living being is thus encapsulated within their own phenomenal experience that enables them to see certain things and exclude others (von Uexküll, 1926).

It follows, perhaps, that there is no such thing as a non-ideological scientific theory and no history of scientific theories that is not, therefore, ideologically oriented. Although with different aspirations typical of the Enlightenment world in which he lived, this was the basic idea of Count Antoine-Louis-Claude Destutt de Tracy, who coined the word 'ideology' at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

With these premises in mind (which I hope are clearly stated even if not shared), I aim in this contribution to outline a brief and partial ideological history of Italian psychology. With this expression, I wish to represent two concepts. The first is that, for obvious reasons of space, I am unable here to deal with the history of Italian psychology as a whole. I will limit myself to three moments, or rather historical phases: the Gentile era between the eponymous educational reform introduced by him and the diaspora of Jewish thinkers; the more recent university reforms (1990-2010) and the neo-liberal perspective that I believe can be found in similar European reforms; and the very recent debate on social policy issues such as those related to professional policies and gender identity. The choice of these three historical foci is, of course, partial and solely aimed at formulating a hypothesis to be tested in subsequent reflections by myself or by those who would like to try their hand at it. Finally, the second concept I wish to portray is that, rather than striving for an objective, non-ideological history, I have chosen to reflect only on the ideological perspective. To my mind, this means acting consistently with the relativistic, functional, and relational perspective outlined above. More concretely, it means hypothesising a karst current in the construction of Italian psychological culture that ranges from the original constitutive phase (the Gentile era) to a recent phase of structural reform of knowledge policy (the 1990-2010 reforms) up to the current debate.

The thesis I am therefore arguing in favour of here is that the ideological history of Italian psychology is characterised by a dualistic *bias* that served and continues to serve a regulatory function in its growth, considerably lim-

iting any radical influence on scientific thought in general and on social life as a whole.

### The original crisis between fascism and neo-idealism

Among the more than two thousand Italians who left our country as a result of the racial laws (1938-1945) there were four Nobel Prize winners: Emilio Segrè, Rita Levi-Montalcini, Franco Modigliani, and Enrico Fermi (the first three were Jewish, the last was married to a Jew). And if we also consider the effect that the German, Italian, and European Jewish diaspora has had on the development of nations such as the U.S.A. and the Soviet Union, one wonders what the cultural and economic fallout of such unjust laws has actually been. If we restrict the field of such a boundless reflection to the history of Italian psychology alone, we can formulate some very disconcerting hypotheses, however difficult they might be to prove. When we move into the field of historiographical *ifs* and *buts*, everything appears probable and nothing is certain. What we can take as a starting point, however, is that the racial laws represented a *catalyst* for a historical process (already underway): the transfer of European knowledge and cultural competences to other nations and continents (Garber, 2008) and the perhaps unstoppable cultural impoverishment of Italian society during the twenty-year fascist period (Amaldi & Zevi, 1989).

My hypothesis is that the promulgation of the racial laws represented for Italian psychology a sort of breaking point in a crisis whose influences have persisted over the years (and are perhaps still ongoing). Important scholars have, in fact, repeatedly noted how Italian psychology suffers from a chronic illness, which is present in its recurrent inability to become autonomous, both from an epistemological and from a pragmatic point of view, in its perennial oscillation between science and philosophy (Cimino & Dazzi, 1998; Marhaba, 2003). And the origin of this evil happens to lie, in particular, in the (failed) transition between its origins and the initial exciting developments at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and during the Second World War. After an initial period of enthusiasm and great fervor in the early 1900s, when university chairs, modules, and different approaches were created, Italian psychology was faced with a crisis, leading to ‘a path that was at best restricted, and at times leading to regression’ (Cimino & Dazzi, 1998, p. 38).

This hypothesis is at least partially supported by two elements: one generically cultural, and one specifically human. Firstly, what seems to define ‘the atypical development’ (Ferruzzi, 1998, p. 714) of Italian psychology and its structural difficulties (and crises) is linked by most historians to its lack of emancipation from philosophy (Cimino & Dazzi, 1998; Mecacci, 2019; Marhaba, 2003). Although psychology is by its very nature

multidisciplinary and cannot disregard its philosophical origins, during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it gradually became a presence in the Western scientific panorama. The epistemological autonomy mentioned by Sadi Marhaba (2003), recognisable in the development of other national psychologies, but not in the Italian one, stems from the construction of a cultural paradigm and a methodological evolution that is not subject to a third discipline. What many have described as the crisis of Italian psychology between the two world wars actually had its origins in the constant (and frustrated) search for legitimisation on the part of the dominant philosophical paradigm. This search for legitimacy, on the one hand, impoverished the resources of Italian psychology, diverting them away from contemporary continental and other debates, and on the other clashed with a philosophical paradigm that positioned itself in clear contrast to psychological knowledge. 'One of the main causes of this lack of development has been identified in the affirmation and dissemination of Croce's and Gentile's neo-idealistic philosophy and culture from the 1920s onwards, which – as is well known – tended to belittle the cognitive value of science, to devalue the so-called human sciences and thus also psychology' (Cimino & Dazzi, 1998, p. 42). Giovanni Gentile, long considered the leading intellectual of Italian fascism, brought about two changes with his school reform to a *status quo ante* that seems unthinkable today: i) the teaching of psychology present in secondary schools since 1889 was abolished; ii) the teaching of the Catholic religion was introduced with the 'functions of a *philosophia inferior*' (Tarquini, 2016) and would serve as a shared minimum basis for our consciences. Apart from complex historiographical reflections on the role of Italian neo-idealism that go beyond the scope of this contribution, we cannot fail to recognise its continuity with a 'classicist, spiritualist and anti-scientific tradition of Italian culture' (Cimino & Dazzi, 1998, p. 43) that hindered the development of psychology along the lines present in the rest of the western world. And we cannot fail to recall that numerous authors have reflected on the cultural obstacle represented by the interconnection between the neo-idealistic panorama and the fascist regime (Ferruzzi, 1998; Luccio, 2013). I will limit myself here to recalling how both historically (Nolte, 1971) and theoretically (Lacoue-Labarthe & Nancy, 1992) fascism is often interpreted as an attempt to reaffirm a specific identity (national, cultural, etc.) to the point of transforming that identity into an incontrovertible and unchangeable absolute, an absolute that certainly cannot come to terms with the variability and precariousness of modern science in its methods and aims. And tragically, in order not to come to terms with what was considered different and/or divergent, fascist absolutism was ready for war, for despotism, and for racial laws.

Finally, we can see how this blindness in defending to the bitter end an alleged ideal of identity can lead us to disregard the human dimension of our

actions. Whenever we do not recognise our interlocutor as a person, 'we can *do* things to him, but we cannot *relate*' to him (Bannister & Fransella, 1971, p. 28), or consider him part of our experience. Without adding brief and empty words about the tragedy of what happened during the Second World War – the *Shoah* – I would simply like to recall how the madness of the racial laws drove away from the field of psychology some of the most brilliant minds who bore both the shame of being Jewish and of being free thinkers. On the one hand, the advocates of the nascent Italian experimental psychology were mostly Jews targeted by the racial laws and subjected to cultural pillory in different forms: Enzo Bonaventura (1981-1948), Vittorio Benussi (1878-1927), Cesare Musatti (1897-1989) to name but a few. On the other hand, psychoanalysis, which represented the frontier of clinical psychology at the time and was disputed by the fascist government and culture, was introduced and supported in Italy by Jewish thinkers such as Edoardo Weiss (1889-1970) and Marco Levi-Bianchini (1875-1961).

In conclusion, it is easy to hypothesise how the intricate relationship between Gentile's neo-idealism and Fascist absolutism hindered academic development as a whole and, specifically, the evolution of Italian psychology. In attempting to conduct an analysis of the emerging ideology, I suggest identifying two macro-directors: a totalitarian epistemology and an elitist praxis. In defining the theory of knowledge and science (epistemology) that emerges, I use the adjective totalitarian with reference to the thought of Emmanuel Lévinas (1961), a Jewish philosopher who survived the concentration camps. In his most famous work, Lévinas states that in Western thinking, the other is always encountered in an imperialistic, indeed, totalitarian manner: he must be brought back into the matrix of knowledge of the self. To know is always to lead back to unique ontological ideas or principles that, therefore, deny the diversity and uniqueness of the other. We can know ourselves insofar as we have become similar (if not identical), not insofar as we are different. Political totalitarianism is, in these terms, an understandable application epigone of that idealistic and ontological perspective so dear to Westerners. This theoretical search for an uncontested superior has always been associated with a dualistic dialectics in which mind and body, ideas and actions are set against each other, as I and the other. If I assume a vision, a unidirectional perspective that originates either from the self or from an irreducible ontological principle, I will necessarily tend to construct a dichotomous and hierarchical organisation. The French sinologist François Jullien (1997) has repeatedly emphasised how Western thought follows this individualistic perspective, where the ideal of man and work always appears in terms of the individual who shapes the world (classic example, Ulysses, who alone, with his brilliant idea, brings a decade-long war to an end). The alternative excluded here pertains to a systemic perspective in which the focus is a network of relationships

capable of generating what we simplistically call results (Julien cites the Chinese ideal of a general who wins without going into battle, working simply on the system, with which the armies could be deployed).

If we try to generalise what the processes are through which a certain neo-idealist ideology has manifested and embodied itself (praxis), we can recognise a clearly elitist matrix. The perspective adhering to the (ontologically true) principle is assumed to be one and limitedly accessible. The Trojan War is solved by the genius of one person, never mind how many fought. Robert Michels (1910), a sociologist dear to Italian fascism, used to repeat that whoever says organisation says oligarchy.

I will try in the last paragraph to reflect on how distant a totalitarian epistemology and elitist praxis are from a profession such as psychology, in which a systemic epistemology and relational praxis are perhaps more viable.

### Hypostasis of an organic crisis: (neo-liberal) reformism

As anticipated, I am not in a position here to cover the entire ideological history of Italian psychology. The thesis I seek to explore in this section is that the panorama of reforms at the turn of the new millennium (1990-2010) once again hindered the development of Italian psychology. And this partial collapse perhaps once again followed the dualistic perspective of separation between the social sciences and the humanities that characterised the neo-idealistic crisis. In my conclusions, I discuss the possible relations between this new dualistic perspective and an ideology such as the neo-idealistic one characterised by a totalitarian epistemology and an elitist praxis. It is, in fact, important to point out that, although by referring to the Gentile reform, the epistemological and practical origin of the co-present ideology is clearer, the numerous reforms that followed, between the late 1980s and the 1910s, apparently appealed to different ideological principles.

All historians agree in recognising a progressive revival of psychological research in Italy from the post-war period until the early 1970s, when researchers of international acclaim were formed, and journals capable of entering the contemporary debate were founded (Cimino & Dazzi, 1998; Mecacci, 2019). The various research centres that were set up in some Italian cities between the 1950s and the 1970s suffered from the absence of dedicated university courses, the effects of the cultural impoverishment of the fascist era, and, according to historians like Luciano Mecacci (2019, p. 432), also from a politically based ideological perspective: secular groups (*e.g.*, around Musatti in Milan), Catholics (*e.g.*, Gemelli's heirs in Milan and Rome), and left-wing groups (*e.g.*, the Institute of Psychology of the CNR in Rome).

The cultural revival of the 1970s and 1980s was supported by internationally renowned authors from different perspectives, such as cognitive science,



psychotherapy or experimental research, as well as through the establishment of the first university degree courses in psychology in Padua and Rome. It appeared that useful synergies were being redefined between academia and institutions, between research and clinical practice. I suspect that the karst current that I have summarised in the construct of dualistic thinking was, in fact, constantly at work in both academia and institutions. The university reforms from 1990 to 2010 (Ruberti, Berlinguer, Moratti, Gelmini reforms) perhaps represent a sort of hypostasis of the organic crisis that lies at the heart of Italian psychology.

The reformist activism at the end of the millennium follows a stagnation that began with the Gentile reform of 1923. For about half a century, the Italian university system was confronted with two basic problems (Galesi, 2005): on the one hand, organisational immobilism maintained the neo-idealistic perspective to the point of opposing any modern instances (*e.g.*, attention to new disciplines, focus on research, multidisciplinary cooperation, operational autonomy, etc.), and on the other hand, the post-war economic boom opened up university instruction to an ever-increasing number of people, creating an educational demand not matched by an adequate supply and organisation. The university reforms were implemented at a time that was far removed from the origin of the problems, with a paradigm shift that, in my opinion, led only to an apparent discontinuity.

Towards the end of the 1980s, a process was initiated (which would later become the Ruberti Reform) that aimed at granting progressive decision-making and organisational autonomy to individual universities. Subsequently, an attempt was made to streamline the bureaucratic complexity of administration and the didactic mode of teaching. According to many observers (not necessarily critical) of the historical process that was triggered in those years, two trajectories were present. On the one hand, by favouring the operational autonomy of the universities, an organisational model emerged that increasingly assimilated these institutions into companies (not unlike what happened in the public health sector before the creation of health care companies). On the other hand, this corporation trend appeared to overturn the internal hierarchy of the faculties: whereas in the Gentile model the humanities faculties and disciplines were the most highly regarded, now advertising revenue and budget interests moved the natural sciences to the heart of university operations (Malizia, 2011; Vaira, 2011).

Subsequent reforms, such as Berlinguer's and then Moratti and Gelmini's, have an increasingly corporatist perspective of the universities and, paradoxically, seem to reiterate previous opposing mechanisms such as the bureaucratisation of university processes (*e.g.*, competitions and evaluation methods) as well as the centralisation on a national scale of general principles (*e.g.*, which discipline should be favoured at any given stage). Political observers from different areas seem to agree on the perpetuation of numerous criticali-

ties and on an indiscriminate corporatist model that does not serve the educational and organisational autonomy of universities (Tocci, 2011; Zecchino, 2015). In particular, as regards the organisation of psychology faculties, in many universities there was a division of chairs and laboratories, between the areas of natural sciences and of the humanities, and all degree courses had to (unlike medical courses) create mini-degrees (B.A./B.Sc.) and consequently a new range of psychology professions to which access is provided upon completion of the three-year degree course.

From an ideological perspective, it is difficult not to link these reforms to a neo-liberal framework first, and subsequently to neo-liberal reformism. By neo-liberalism one usually implicates a market perspective in which free competition would indirectly lead to the improvement of collective welfare. Within this economic framework, the pursuit of a political ideal and abstract theorising would be objectives devoid of practical meaning, whereas it is actually an intentional *laissez-faire* that is being pursued (Vallier, 2022). Thus, the privatist promotion of university operations could perhaps move in this direction. The autonomy of universities, as conceived by Ruberti and subsequently applied, is primarily a financial and managerial autonomy (Legrottaglie, 2019). But what was introduced in the reforms is perhaps more akin to a reformist framework, of which neoliberalism is only one component. In fact, the reforms that were enacted contain a probable vision-outline and a macro-decisional centralism, yet we do not know how intentional they were even though they were undeniably present in the various developments. Reformism, especially in the Western version that emerged in the 1990s, often referred to as the Third Way, with reference to the political procedures in countries such as Great Britain, the United States, Germany, and Italy, intends to mediate the instances of neoliberal *laissez-faire* with social democratic centralism. Interestingly, the criticisms levelled against Italian university reforms are, at least in part, not dissimilar to those levelled against this form of Third Way reformism. Political analyses identify two points that are, in my opinion, fundamental (Hale *et al.*, 2018): on the one hand, the absence of a clear alternative ideological perspective to centralism and neoliberalism leads political actors to choices that are based more on a realisational opportunism than choices consistent with a superordinate perspective; on the other hand, if one disregards the fact that not everyone has access to the same initial resources (*laissez-faire*), or that not everyone shares the same values or aspirations (centralism), this may lead to more problems than solutions. In the practice of university policies, two types of risks can be identified in the Italian reform season (in parallel with the two previous allegations): family economic resources represent an obstacle to the choice of university degree courses in the absence of an organic intervention of grants; the level of education (as well as the level of health care) must necessarily be subject to rigorous management but also offer long-term advantages for the state, that cannot be monetised in the short



term, just like any other structural investment (Legrottoglie, 2019; Malizia, 2011; Tocci, 2010). What international data show beyond doubt is the association between quality of education provided by the state (as well as quality of health care) and economic growth, confirming the profitability of this type of structural investment (Beylik *et al.*, 2022; Hanushek & Wößmann, 2016).

If we go back to the field of psychology and view it with this lens and consider the possibilities of access to a three-year degree course in psychology or a four-year specialization course in psychotherapy, we can clearly acknowledge the practical implications of all this. Although up-to-date data are not readily available, there has evidently been a growing trend over the years of psychologists enrolled in Register B (three-year degree course), and at the same time, a significant proportion (around 37%) of psychologists enrolled in Register A, which leads to a psychotherapy qualification (CNOP and ENPAP data). Yet at the same time, public specialisation schools offering psychotherapy qualification manage to propound a maximum (theoretical) number of places per year of about 100-150, while over several years the places available were far fewer. A neo-liberal principle would like the market to act as a regulator of the different *competitors*, but this principle only works to the extent that there is an equal initial access to professional opportunities. It is a well-known fact that enrolment fees differ notably between public and private schools, but this is the least of the problems. Psychotherapists provide 150 hours of professional activity per year to different institutions (public and private) in the form of internships and, unlike their medical colleagues, they do not receive remuneration. At the same time, the recently formulated national guidelines regarding the treatment of psychological problems, seek to use the workforce of the B-registered undergraduates as the first line of intervention, disregarding the basic principles of health care where, for example, it is the orthopaedist who refers the patient to physiotherapy rehabilitation after having ruled out a bone fracture and the need for a plaster cast, not the other way round (for a review see Cheli, 2023). One wonders what structural advantage would be generated if one had hundreds of psychotherapy residents contracted to the health system (like orthopaedists, endocrinologists, etc.), perhaps possibly with a system of mixed fees (both public and private situations) to partially cover the training costs.

If we try to formulate interpretative hypotheses on what ideological model emerges from this reformist phase, and its impact on Italian psychology, I think it is easy to discern at least three elements. First, unlike the Gentile reform, there is no organic and explicit ideological matrix that organises and informs the various choices. Secondly, the legislative proposals and the various revisions seem to identify two *fil rouge*. On the one hand, there is a clear neo-liberal principle in the redefinition of universities in view of a primarily financial autonomy. On the other, there emerges, not always expressed or perhaps merely intended, a reformist centralism that intends to steer the macro

direction of the choices of universities and departments, rather than simply removing economic impediments to neoliberal *laissez-faire*. Thirdly, the operational impact on the organisation of psychology training and practice is easily interpreted in a dualistic and elitist perspective. Albeit with different signs, the dichotomy between natural and social sciences has led to the division of many psychology faculties. Clinical practice is increasingly in the hands of a private market of psychotherapy schools that do not necessarily follow scientific principles but rather *marketing* principles, in which the clients are assigned the role of the psychologists themselves. Funded research is increasingly found in specialised medical fields (e.g., neuroscience), while very few clinical studies are carried out. Numerous financial and organisational obstacles restrict psychologists' access to training in psychology, and users' access to qualified psychological services.

### The importance of doubt

I have tried to point out that the perspective of the Gentile reform is based on a neo-idealistic ideology that is articulated in a totalitarian epistemology and elitist praxis. It assumes a single principle to adhere to, and discourages broad access to training resources. This perspective contrasts with the very idea of science, as openness to the unknown, as well as with the founding idea of clinical praxis in psychology, as openness to the different. It is perhaps not by chance that the Gentile era ended with the diaspora of many researchers and clinicians who were the founders of Italian psychology.

The reforms that belatedly emerged towards the end of the 1980s probably added new problems without resolving the long-standing effects of the previous era. The universities pursued financial rather than thinking autonomy, perhaps denying what is the founding epistemological and pragmatic principle of education and research. I do not know whether this political attitude falls under Lévinas' definition of totalitarianism, but what I do know is that science requires the promotion of a heretical attitude towards the known, and resources to explore the unknown. Furthermore, the dualistic divide between the natural and the social sciences has not been countered in any way, and obstacles to equal access by both psychology students and users of psychology services do not appear to have been the central concern of legislators.

How is all this past history affecting current choices and events in psychology? In this concluding paragraph, I will try to formulate possible answers to this question, although I am fully aware that history and contemporaneity are two separate things. It is also good to acknowledge how difficult it is not to widen one's gaze to what is happening in the world around us. Therefore, my reflections are necessarily less specific than what I was trying to do for the

Gentile reform, which was implemented a century ago and refers specifically to Italy.

To sum up, my interpretative hypotheses on the current debate and the predominant ideology in psychology are twofold, one relating to praxis (anchored to data), and the other relating to the dominant epistemology (the result of speculation): i) elitist praxis seems to have remained unchanged both in the training of psychologists and in the provision of psychology services (particularly clinical services); ii) a certain totalitarian tendency (undoubtedly dualistic) still seems to be present, perhaps due rather to the lack of an epistemological model alternative to the Gentile model of the last century.

The data in the above paragraph clearly show how the current training system makes it difficult to offer equal initial access opportunities to all Italian citizens. Having the qualification of psychotherapist increases the possibility of having a higher income and of offering more effective interventions to clients. But access to that title requires financial and time resources that are not available to all psychologists. Nevertheless, clinical practice remains the predominant source of income for Italian psychologists. As far as research is concerned, psychology is affected by the common Italian trend of shrinking numbers of PhD students and of allocated funding. At the same time, the most widely demanded psychological services (*i.e.*, clinical services) seem to be subject to the same fate. The public service can only count on 5,000 psychologists for a population of 60 million Italians, while increasing numbers of the population are unable to pay for private courses. If we consider these data as a whole, I believe it is difficult to disqualify the hypothesis that an elitist stance in the approach to psychology, which originated over a century ago, is still very much present in today's ideology.

If we remain in the field of common epistemology, however implicit, the propositions are necessarily more elusive. As noted above, reforms have in many universities exacerbated a long-standing rift between the humanities and natural sciences, fragmenting psychological knowledge into departments that have diverse projects and aims, as well as geographical locations. The Humboldtian model of universities (much criticised, but perhaps wrongly) envisaged a marriage in education between *naturwissenschaft* and *geisteswissenschaft* (lit. natural and spiritual sciences) rather than each taking a separate path. In addition to organisational problems, the reiteration of this fracture supports a strongly dualistic epistemological implication that we can find in many areas of current psychology. I mention here only three examples, and refer the reader to other bibliographic sources. Although it is well known that psychosocial interventions can be as effective as pharmacological ones, investments in education and health care diverge strongly in favour of a medicalist perspective. Similarly, medical psychiatrists can automatically access the practice of psychotherapy despite often having

received limited training in this field during their specialisation. It appears that the dualism of the Gentile reform is still present, albeit with a change of contrast direction, using George A. Kelly's expression (1955): *i.e.*, a very unstable change in which one remains in the same dimension of meaning moving only by sharp contrasts. For Gentile, the sciences of the spirit had priority, whereas now the sciences of nature have that priority, without ever achieving the epistemological autonomy that Marhaba spoke of. Secondly, in the debate that has impassioned psychotherapists of all approaches over the last ten years, namely the use of experiential techniques, it seems once again that we are heading for a change by contrast. After the introduction of manuals and handbooks on cognitive restructuring, mentalisation and the like, today interventions are often presented with an almost exclusive focus on the body component (*e.g.*, tapping, power poses, etc.). Although many use the cognitive and body components in an integrated manner, the language (*e.g.*, bottom-up approaches) conveys the same dualistic epistemology found in neo-idealism. Thirdly, the controversies that have inflamed both cognitive-behavioural and psychoanalytical scientific societies in recent months on issues related to gender identity (*e.g.*, dysphoria, the use of puberty blockers, etc.) often re-propose a sharp contrast between hyper-biological and hyper-constructivist positions. Opposing affirmative approaches to gender dysphoria leads to an a priori denial of the usefulness of pharmacological treatments for forms of psychological malaise (*e.g.*, puberty blockers), while supporting such approaches implies an a priori denial of the usefulness of psychosocial supports (*e.g.*, psychotherapy).

All these oppositions and the possible underlying dualism do not merely concern epistemological attitudes but can, in fact, overflow into relational attitudes. It is difficult not to discern forms of intolerance (totalitarian, Lévinas would perhaps say) in certain contrasts between different people. Perhaps the same relational contrasts that make dialogue between different psychotherapeutic approaches so difficult, or that make us forget how unbalanced the relationship between therapist and patient is, and when attention is required in proposing both cognitive and experiential techniques.

The Czech philosopher Jan Patocka (2003) used to claim that the Socratic saying, 'I know that I do not know', is an ethical principle. It reminds us that the encounter with the other is an unknown terrain where we must humbly accept to expose ourselves to unpredictability and ignorance. This is the same attitude that should characterise science, or rather the epistemology and praxis behind science. It seems strange to point out, after centuries of contrasting scientific and humanistic studies, that the principles that animate interpersonal experiences are the very principles that animate scientific experiences. Doubt opens up curiosity, and curiosity turns the different into something to be valued rather than assimilated (Cheli, 2017).

I am unable, in a few final sentences, to formulate a way out of the dif-

ficulties of Italian psychology. However, I would like to emphasise that there are forms of epistemology as well as praxis based on a similar openness to doubt and diversity. These often have as much to do with a systemic and relational perspective in education as in psychology. One can consider, for instance, the idea of social epistemology in terms of the co-construction and collaborative organisation of science (Fuller, 2002), or of interpersonal approaches to clinical practice, in which the obviousness of psychotherapy as relational praxis is firmly at the centre of all reflection (Safran & Segal, 1990).

## Conclusions

History is always ideological, it has value insofar as it shows a worldview and a way of being in the world. In my contribution I have attempted to identify some ideological traits in the history of Italian psychology. In doing so, I have focused on two turning (or critical) points and then formulated some reflections on common traits and possible repercussions in the current debate. The first phase corresponds to the Gentile reform and its epigones during fascism. The hypothesis proposed is that even a century ago the initial vitality of Italian psychology clashed with the constraints imposed by the neo-idealist perspective. These constraints have conveyed an epistemology that – borrowing from Lévinas – I have called totalitarian, that is, strongly oriented towards subordinating all perspectives to that of the higher philosophy dear to Gentile. The influences were, in my opinion, dramatic. Italian psychology lost all possible independence from philosophy, perpetuating a dualistic attitude in its thinking, the relationship between mind and body, and between natural and social sciences. Moreover, an elitist practice emerged that further isolated psychology from other disciplines and its own potential students. The second phase corresponds instead to the season of university reforms between the late 1980s and the 1990s. Here, a belated attempt was made to repair the problems caused by the Gentile reform by introducing neo-liberal financial autonomy and centralised decision-making that had little to do with the reformist ambitions of the legislators. My hypothesis is that this season of reforms perpetuated the dualistic attitude towards many of the fundamental issues of psychology and a newly elitist practice. The current condition of psychotherapy training and the spread of psychotherapy services in the public service is taken as an example of these trends. Finally, I presented a brief reflection on the current debates as a cue to reflect on how the evolution of Italian psychology never seems to have addressed the structural issues of a *new* ideology that would be useful in developing effective training programmes and implementation strategies. In particular, the failure to propose an epistemological model, alternative to the neo-idealistic one, has turned reforms into organisa-

tional exercises. The reformist perspective, devoid of a superordinate ideology, has only led to availability of instruments of financial autonomy for universities in a centralist bureaucratic framework. In short, we have forgotten that universities and research require freedom and independence in constructing and deconstructing thought, before managing the budget. And both research and clinical practice live thanks to a relational attitude of openness to the unknown and the uncertain.

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