



Citation: Riccardo Capoferro (2021) *Politics and Culture in 18th-Century Anglo-Italian encounters: Entangled Histories*, ed. by Lidia De Michelis, Lia Guerra and Frank O’Gorman, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Cambridge 2019. *Diciottesimo Secolo* Vol. 6: 203-205. doi: 10.36253/ds-13066

Copyright: © 2021 Riccardo Capoferro. This is an open access, peer-reviewed article published by Firenze University Press (<http://www.fupress.net/index.php/ds>) and distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

Competing Interests: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

Recensioni

***Politics and Culture in 18th-Century Anglo-Italian encounters: Entangled Histories*, ed. by Lidia De Michelis, Lia Guerra and Frank O’Gorman, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Cambridge 2019, XVIII-312 pp.**

Bringing together a variety of disciplines, *Politics and Culture in 18th-Century Anglo-Italian encounters: Entangled Histories* is a collection of essays exploring how British and Italian cultures intertwined during the age of Enlightenment. While in many academic cultures 18th-century studies have always shown an interdisciplinary inspiration – blurring, for example, the distinctions between literary and intellectual history – the transnational nature of the Enlightenment is, more often than not, evoked rather than investigated with a self-conscious comparative approach. This collection, conversely, bridges the gaps between different disciplines – with a strong methodological awareness – and traces the links between British and Italian cultures, doing full justice of our common understanding of the Enlightenment as a trans-national phenomenon. In doing so, it sets a fruitful example for future comparative undertakings.

The interdisciplinary focus of the book is made apparent by its introductory apparatus: it includes two introductions, in conversation with each other, that present the essays from two different angles. In the first introduction, Frank O’Gorman places the collection within the framework of political history. O’Gorman traces the history and scope of the discipline showing how – thanks to the work of historians such as Eric Hobsbawm and E. P. Thompson – it transitioned from focusing on political events *stricto sensu* to developing an interest in «social and economic groups, revealing their political ideas and their political strategies» (p. X). In doing so, O’Gorman tells us, political historians have re-interpreted the meaning of “political”, showing how political engagement could infiltrate many levels of social life and cultural production. Drawing significant examples from the history of the field, O’Gorman also highlights how new historiographic approaches have re-described momentous political events as narratives woven by a vast range of social actors and forces. These studies have powerfully shown how Political History has changed over time to include «reinterpretations of how power is exercised, maintained or even opposed within a particular community» (p. XI), thus exemplifying a new awareness in historical writing. Social as well as technological transformations, O’Gorman reminds us, have alerted historical writing to the possibility of embracing aspects of «social, economic and cultural change». As a consequence, even a seemingly well-demarcated phenomenon such as politics appears now ingrained in a diversified social fabric, one that also includes «patterns of wealth, status, commerce and consumption» (p. XII). Moreover, O’Gorman highlights that a fully realized political history should not necessarily be a national one, emphasizing that one of the

strengths of the book lies in its focus on «international relations and intercultural influences» (p. XII).

The framework adopted by O’Gorman easily accommodates the many contributions to this book, which I will discuss later on, after narrowing my focus on the second introductory section, by Lidia De Michelis and Lia Guerra. De Michelis and Guerra’s angle takes stock of theoretical and methodological changes in literary studies, providing a more specific reflection on the transnational/comparative focus of the collection. Preliminarily, they define ‘culture’, tracing – after Raymond Williams’ example – changes in the meaning of the term with a view to defining the far-ranging inter-discursive approach that informs the collection. While they take their cue from social and cultural history – thus establishing a methodological connection with O’Gorman’s perspective – they also refer to a variety of developments in literary studies, in particular to the new historicist interest in the cultural contexts of literary works, complemented, over the years, by the focus of book history on the materiality of culture. Needless to say, even in the practice of new historicism, the political implications of culture have been prominent.

De Michelis and Guerra devote special attention to a definition of the third key term in the title of the collection, «encounters», expounding on the trans-national, comparative focus of the essays. They highlight how the encounters investigated in *Politics and Culture* constitute cases of cultural appropriation: preexisting texts were not only used in new contexts for new, specific purposes, but they were also inscribed with new meanings. A focus on specific encounters, however, also constitutes an opportunity to assess the way in which cultural history is made by individual actors that play a part in broader trends, building ideology rather than being controlled by it: De Michelis and Guerra suggest that the inter-cultural exchanges considered by most essays in the collection can be regarded as «micro-histories» whose comparative analysis can demonstrate «how adventurous reality can be – how common people gave sense and meaning to their universe» (p. XVIII).

In a variety of ways, the essays of *Politics and Culture* exemplify these historiographical principles. John Dunkley and Rosamaria Loretelli’s study of the translations of *The Italian* by Ann Radcliffe in Italy and France focuses, for instance, on the political overtones of Morellet’s translation, which used the passages on the Inquisition to foreground how dangerous the Church could be in the exercise of its power. Concentrating on the intercultural dimension of economic history, Stefano Adamo focuses on the part played by Bernardo Davanzati’s *Lezione delle monete* in the English debate on the

«Great recoinage», which also involved John Locke. Adamo shows how John Toland’s translation of Davanzati’s work reinforced Locke’s own position by adding emphasis and clarity to the original text, in a key moment in the emergence of the public sphere. Lidia De Michelis’s study of Sylvester Douglas’s translation of Cesare Beccaria’s *Discourse on Public Oeconomy* illuminates an important connection between the Scottish Enlightenment – with its socially-oriented economic theory – and Beccaria’s approach, which considers the economy in relation to a project of national improvement.

The collection’s interest in fruitful encounters is even more apparent in the section devoted to “travel and networks”. In a careful and illuminating reconstruction, Manuela D’Amore traces the way in which, thanks to the fellows of the Royal Society, Southern Italy became part of the Grand Tour routes. The *Philosophical Transactions* – which turned Campania and Italy into new objects of empirical knowledge – richly document this interest which was eventually conducive to the establishment of new networks. Andrea Benedetti’s essay narrows its focus on travel writing, both English and German, bringing to the fore its post-revolutionary political meanings. Benedetti focuses, in particular, on the representation of the political and natural landscapes of Switzerland in the travel account by historian William Coxe, and on the impact it had on the American constitutional process. Andrea Penso’s essay focuses more narrowly on the Italian context, showing how European events resonated in Italian Literature. Penso examines, in particular, Vincenzo Monti’s poetry and its response to the French revolution, as well as Monti’s durable but at the same time mutable interest in British history. Penso shows how Monti’s view of English culture and society was, very often, politicized, England constituting, for its culture and institutions, a social and political model and, at a later stage, an object of Monti’s poetic invectives. With a careful archival research, Salvatore Bottari focuses on the British penetration into the Mediterranean, in particular on the British commercial network in Sicily, shedding further light on the interplay of trade and politics that marked the emergence of Britain as a global sea power.

Dealing with the *politics of taste*, the third group of essays instantiates the political focus valued by Frank O’Gorman. Francesca Orestano’s chapter centers on the figure of Ercole Ghirlanda Silva, the botanist, author and traveller that promoted landscape gardening in Northern Italy. Orestano’s interpretation of the work of Ghirlanda Silva and its fabric of symbolic meanings is, moreover, inseparable from a reconstruction of the practice and the political implications of landscape gardening

at the eve of the Risorgimento. In her reading of Fanny Burney's *The Wanderer*, Barbara Witucki brings to light Burney's strong awareness of the Italian (and classical) cultural hegemony – in particular of the prestige of Italian music – and documents the widespread impact of Italian architecture and music. Lily Kass's essay focuses, more specifically, on music, tracing the extraordinary career of Italian singer Brigida Giorgi Banti, whose performances – in particular her interpretations of *God save the King* and *Rule Britannia* – celebrated the rise of Britain as a world power. Elena Carrelli concentrates on the relation between the art market and the Grand Tour in Italy. In her reconstruction of the career of the self-styled English painter Pietro Fabris, Sir William Hamilton emerges as a key figure, capable of shaping the taste of a community of collectors.

As this quick overview has showed, this collection manages to exemplify its theoretical presuppositions in spite of the broad range of scholars and disciplines involved. It explores specific contexts and characters – often with a fruitful archival excavation – while at the same time showing how individual actors and actions affected the larger fabric of culture. Ranging between commerce, politics, and aesthetic consumption, it manages, moreover, to show how different cultural realms were shaped by local practices and concerns while also participating in the cosmopolitan culture of the Enlightenment.

Riccardo Capoferro
Università di Roma "La Sapienza"