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Vincenzo Cuoco. On Limits of Revolution and Constitutionalism¹

Vincenzo Cuoco was born in the village of Civitacampomariano, near Campobasso, in 1770 to a professional family with deep roots in the Molise countryside. His origins gave little inkling of the place that he was later to occupy in the intellectual history of Naples and Italy and the study of revolutions and constitutionalism. He is one of the few Italian theorists of the French revolutionary and Napoleonic period to attain a European significance, as his work was almost immediately translated into French² and German. He has been hailed at various times by thinkers as diverse as Manzoni, de Sanctis, Croce, Gentile and Gramsci; and his reformist sympathies, coupled with acute sensitivity to the decisive role of context and tradition in effective political argument, made him a key figure in the emergence of a liberal position in the Risorgimento³.

Yet his role in the tradition of Italian political thought and practice only captures an aspect of his contribution to theory. Cuoco's life (1770-1823) spanned the period of revolution and reaction which was the crucible that formed the character of so much of the political thought and practice of the nineteenth century⁴. The contrast at the heart of his thinking is between positions that judged the adequacy of institutions in terms of the requirements of abstract theory and those that sought to understand the rationale of institutions in terms of their relations with popular attitudes, dispositions, and even prejudices - that is, the complex of mores and traditions, the habits of the heart and of the mind, that antedate a written constitution and serve as "its basis"⁵ - what the Romans called *mos*.

Cuoco's hostility to revolutionary and constitutional rationalism was grounded in basic assumptions about human beings and principles of organization that accepted human fallibility and the potential for error-correcting capabilities while rejecting perfectibility in human affairs and making a tabula rasa of the past. His views were influenced by the strictures of de Maistre and Burke⁶, though he was a better historian than either of them and his theoretical reflections are accordingly more subtle. Crucially from the perspective of the history of political ideas, he embraced the theoretical critique of political rationalism without endorsing either conservative or reactionary positions. His position, rooted in a suspicion of abstract construction, comes close to Hume and the authors of *The Federalist*, though it is doubtful that he knew of them. Cuoco deployed anti-rationalist arguments in defense of liberal constitutionalism; he saw the chief task

¹ This is a slightly modified version of the introduction of the English-language edition of Vincenzo Cuoco's *Saggio Storico della Rivoluzione Napoletana del 1799*, edited by Filippo Sabetti and Bruce Haddock, forthcoming for the University of Toronto Press as part of the DaPonte Italian Library. The Pasquale Villani's 1806 edition of *The Saggio Storico* and the *Frammenti di lettere dirette a Vincenzo Russo* were used as the main text for the translation, done by David Gibbons. Please note that all the references to the *Saggio Storico* and to the *Frammenti* here refer to the English-language edition of Cuoco, *Historical Essay on the Neapolitan Revolution of 1799*. Filippo Sabetti wishes to acknowledge support from the Social Science and Humanities Research Committee of Canada for field work in Naples in the summers of 2011 and 2012. Both he and Bruce Haddock thank Dario Castiglione, the journal editor and, of course, the University of Toronto Press for allowing the publication of this essay here.

² The 1807 French edition translated by Bertrand Barère has recently been republished under the editorship of Anna Maria Rao and Maité Bouyssi (2001) on behalf of the Istituto Italiano per gli Studi Filosofici of Naples. In their introduction, the editors explore at some length the relationship between Barère and Cuoco.

³ See L. BISCARDI - A. DE FRANCESCO, eds. *Vincenzo Cuoco nella cultura di due secoli*, Laterza, Bari 2002.

⁴ B. HADDOCK, *A History of Political Thought: 1789 to the Present*. Polity, Cambridge 2005, pp. 9-41.

⁵ CUOCO, *Fragments* 3 and 6.

⁶ E. BURKE, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. A. J. Grieve, Dent, London 1967; J. MAISTRE, *Considerations on France*, trans. R. A. Lebrun, McGill Queen's University Press, Montreal 1974. See also D. LOSURDO, *Vincenzo Cuoco, la rivoluzione napoletana del 1799 e la comparatistica delle rivoluzioni*, in 'Storia e società', 46 (1989), pp. 895-925; J.G. A. POCOCK, *The Political Economy of Burke's Analysis of the French Revolution*, in 'The Historical Journal', 25 (2/1982), pp. 331-349; R. ZAPPERI, *Edmund Burke in Italia*, in 'Cahiers Vilfredo Pareto', 3 (7-8/1965) pp. 5-62.

of institutional arrangements not so much to prevent individuals from doing evil but to reacquaint them with the good even when advancing their self-interest.⁷ For these reasons, while he was aware of the gulf that separated elite and popular views, he contended throughout his career that an effective political culture and resulting public spirit had necessarily to accommodate both perspectives.

1. The Making of a Theorist

Cuoco moved to Naples in 1787 to study law. It was an exciting time to be in Naples as relations between Enlightenment figures and the monarchy seemed to confirm Gaetano Filangieri's hope that, finally, philosophy was coming to the aid of government in moving society forward. But the self-description we have of Cuoco in his early years in Naples⁸ and the less-than-flattering impression of his work habits by a standard bearer of Neapolitan Enlightenment, Giuseppe Maria Galanti⁹ suggest Cuoco was more interested in exploring the pleasures of life than in following public affairs in Naples and beyond. As late as 1792, Cuoco continued to practice law and did not take part in any clandestine activity or Jacobin club.

He found the vocation of political theorist forced upon him by circumstances. As he noted in a letter to a friend published in the preface of the first edition of the *Historical Essay* and reprinted in the second edition:

Is it not strange how the world goes? The king of Naples declares war on the French, and is defeated. The French conquer his kingdom, and then abandon it. The king returns, and proclaims it a capital offense to have loved one's country in the time when it no longer belonged to him. All this happened without my having the slightest part in it, without even having predicted it. But all this also meant that I was exiled, that I came to Milan, where certainly, had my life followed its ordinary course, I was not destined to come, and where, as a result of having nothing else to do, I became an author (70).

He turned to the study of the Neapolitan revolution "to alleviate the leisure and tedium of exile."

Even a casual reading of the *Historical Essay* suggests that, by the early 1800s, he had read widely, with interests beyond the fields of history, political theory and jurisprudence with which he is most closely associated¹⁰. Trained as a lawyer, he tended from the earliest years of his studies to focus on the detailed treatment of ideas in context, always with an eye on practical opportunities for reform and improvement. He put his professional expertise at the service of communities in their claim to common property resources on feudal land and in their support for reforestation projects, adding to his practical knowledge of the complexity of feudal land-holding and agricultural practices in the Kingdom of Naples. He felt closest to theorists such as Machiavelli and Vico, who in different ways set ideas and practices in a developmental frame of reference¹¹.

His collected work¹² will take up seven volumes and more than two thousand pages. They show mature powers of observation and reflection covering a wide variety of topics from statistics and public administration to education and literature. There are now four different

⁷ CUOCO, *Fragment 6*; cfr. "Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, James Madison. *The Federalist*, no.55. Modern Library, New York no date.

⁸ Cuoco in P. VILLANI, *Saggio Storico sulla Rivoluzione di Napoli*, BUR Rizzoli, Milan 2004[1966, 1806], pp. 6-7.

⁹ A. DE FRANCESCO, *Vincenzo Cuoco. Una vita politica*, Laterza, Bari 1997, pp. 9-13.

¹⁰ F. BATTAGLIA, *L'Opera di Vincenzo Cuoco e la formazione dello spirito nazionale in Italia*, R. Bemporad & Figlio, Florence 1925; U. CARPI, *Appunti su Ideologia postrivoluzionaria e riflessione storiografica dopo il triennio giacobino*, in 'Rivista italiana di Studi Napoleonici' 39(1-2/1992), pp. 56-75; A. DE FRANCESCO, *Vincenzo Cuoco. Una vita politica*, Laterza, Bari 1997.

¹¹ N. DI MASO, *Il repubblicanesimo di Vincenzo Cuoco. A partire da Machiavelli*, Centro Editoriale Toscano, Florence 2005 ; B. HADDOCK, *Vico's Political Thought*, Mortlake Press, Swansea 1986 ; D. L. MARSHALL, *Vico and the Transformation of Rhetoric in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge University Press, New York 2010, pp. 28-29.

¹² Being published in Italian by Laterza; a list of the principal editions of his work can be found in the bibliography at the end of the book.

teams of researchers - one each in Campobasso, Milan, Naples and Pisa – mining Cuoco's wide-ranging thought and insights¹³. A research centre in Campobasso is devoted to the study of Cuoco's life and thought and, since 2003, has been publishing an annual review, *Annali Cuochiani*, exploring Cuoco's ideas and times.

The movement of ideas that formed the Neapolitan Enlightenment and shaped Cuoco's repertoire of knowledge was far from being insular¹⁴. Leading French ideas were avidly discussed. Cuoco's preference, however, was always for theories that took historical context and tradition seriously. He preferred Montesquieu and De Lolme to Voltaire, Diderot or Condorcet, and remained suspicious of elite-driven programs of reform, whether in the guise of enlightened despotism or republican theory. If he is sometimes portrayed as a critic of Enlightenment constitutionalism, we must remember that it is the rationalist and perfectionist strand that he has in mind¹⁵. Prospects for lasting improvement, he always argued, are best guaranteed through engagement with rich local cultures. His early work with Giuseppe Maria Galanti taught him to take seriously the value of detailed empirical research in any discussion of practical proposals. This experience would later become an article of faith in Cuoco's thinking and shaped his negative reactions to the republican constitutional design of 1799 presented in the *Fragments*. Wholesale reform imposed from a distant capital and based on assumptions of human perfectibility, he predicted, would have incalculable negative consequences in local contexts, would generate counter-intentional results and inadvertently undermine the smooth functioning of public affairs and social and economic life.

Working as a young lawyer in Naples, he found himself associating with men whose ideas had been formed in the great reform movement of the eighteenth century. In Naples a generation of students like Galanti had been introduced to the practical ideas of the Enlightenment through the teaching and writing of Antonio Genovesi. Identification with the Enlightenment, of course, as we have noted above, could not be viewed as the adoption of a unitary position. What was shared, however, was the assumption that moral and political problems could be resolved if rigorous scientific methods were applied to the study of society. Such ideas informed the cult of enlightened despotism: ignorance and ill will were seen as the principal obstacles to reform, and these could be most readily overcome if a ruler used his considerable power of direction and persuasion to focus the intellectual resources of a society on the resolution of specific practical problems. In practice, monarchs would only follow the recommendations of reformers if their own interests could be most effectively advanced in this way. But, more importantly, monarchs themselves would find their own actions constrained by the entrenched privileges of the church and the aristocracy.

As recently as 1701 the Neapolitan nobility had risen in open rebellion against the crown in defence of inherited position; and the church had shown little or no inclination to slacken its hold on the structure of society. Pietro Giannone had estimated in 1723, in his classic *Istoria civile del regno di Napoli*, that the church owned four-fifths of the wealth of Naples¹⁶. Giannone had a particular axe to grind against the church and did not work with the sources. Thus his estimates are not reliable. But when these limitations are duly taken into account, there is something to his argument. In 1786, of approximately 2,000 communities (*universitates*), 384 were crown demesnes,

¹³ F. TESSITORE, *Il ritorno di Cuoco*, in 'Archivio della Storia della Cultura', XXI(2008), pp. 227-232; see also R. M. DAINOTTO, *With Plato in Italy: The Value of Literary Fiction in Napoleonic Italy*, in 'Modern Language Quarterly', 73(September 2011), pp. 399-418; M. THEMELLY, *Letteratura e politica nell'età napoleonica. Il Platone in Italia* di Vincenzo Cuoco, in 'Belfagor', XLV(March 1990), pp. 125-156.

¹⁴ J. ROBERTSON, *The Case for the Enlightenment. Scotland and Naples 1680-1760*, New York: Cambridge University Press, New York 2005; F. SABETTI, *Public Happiness as the Wealth of Nations. The Rise of Political Economy in Naples in a Comparative Perspective*, in 'California Italian Studies', 3 (1/2012), pp. 1-31.

¹⁵ V. FERRONE, *The Politics of Enlightenment: Constitutionalism, Republicanism, and the Rights of Man in Gaetano Filangieri*, trans. S. A. Reinert, Anthem Press, New York 2012, pp. 153-175.

¹⁶ P. GIANNONE, *Istoria civile del regno di Napoli*, ed. S. Bertelli, Einaudi, Turin 1978.

with a population of slightly more than a million, while 1,616 were feudal demesnes, with more than 3,000,000 inhabitants¹⁷. At the same time, modern historians are discovering that the populations in feudal dominions were far from being “sacks of potatoes” or hapless victims of circumstances. Local communities used multiple strategies, including “adversarial literacy¹⁸” to minimize exposures to systems of rule and taxation rigged against them. Various forms of resistance emerged which in time became ways of coping with the contingencies of life¹⁹. Like the Roman and Venetian countryside of roughly the same time²⁰, the Neapolitan countryside was often the site of contestation between, on one hand, great aristocratic families and expanding administration of the kingdom and, on the other, marginalized villages using local oral tradition and local charters as well as ideas and texts exported from outside to defend themselves; often the same dynamics pitted neighboring villages against one another²¹. John Marino has shown that “Naples had a strong tradition of decentralized, neighbor-based political organizations, both noble and popular, through the Middle Ages” and that the Neapolitans succeeded in constructing a civic identity in the face of Spanish domination in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries²². Research on the governance of natural resources and local undertakings has brought to light a relatively high level of local self-governance in the kingdom until the eighteenth century²³. Thus there was something in Cuoco’s calling up the practice of local parliaments as a way of thinking about another way of doing constitutional choice in Naples, one that drew on the practical experience extending from the bottom up rather than imposed by force or without consent from the top down and modeled on the French constitution of Year III (22 August 1795)²⁴.

Still, in the 1790s the Kingdom of Naples was a feudal society, with nobility and church enjoying considerable rights, including exemption from taxation and veto powers in public affairs. It was extraordinarily difficult for one single set of national leaders or enlightened despots to affect large-scale positive changes. In the face of concerted opposition from entrenched interests, the plans of reformers could make little impact on society (with or without the support

¹⁷ Data from L. BIANCHINI, *Della storia delle finanze del Regno di Napoli*, Arnaldo Forni Editore, Bologna [1839] 1983, reported in A. M. RAO, *The Feudal Question in the Kingdom of Naples*, in M. BROERS, P. HICKS - A. GUIMERA (eds.), *The Napoleonic Empire and the New European Political Culture*, Palgrave Macmillan, London 2012, p. 228; see also P. Colletta, *History of the Kingdom of Naples 1734-1825*, vol. 1, Hamilton Adams, London 1858[1838], pp. 134-136.

¹⁸ C. CASTIGLIONE, *Patrons and Adversaries. Nobles and Villagers in Italian Politics 1640-1760*, Cambridge University Press, New York 2005.

¹⁹ D. CERERE, *Suppliche, resistenze, protesta popolare. Le forme della lotta politica nella Calabria del Settecento*, in ‘Quaderni Storici’ XLVI (138/December 2011), pp. 765-796; A. MUSI, *The Kingdom of Naples in the Spanish Imperial System*, in T. J. DANDELET - J. MARINO (eds.), *Spain in Italy. Politics, Society and Religion 500-1700*, Brill, Boston 2007, pp. 73-97; A. MUSI, “Italy,” in P. BICKLE, ed., *Resistance, Representation and Community*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 2007, pp. 291-319.

²⁰ C. CASTIGLIONE, *Patrons and Adversaries. Nobles and Villagers in Italian Politics 1640-1760*, Cambridge University Press, New York 2005; E. MUIR, *Was there republicanism in the Renaissance Republics? Venice after Agnadello*, in J. MARTIN AND D. ROMANO, eds., *Venice Reconsidered. The History and Civilization of an Italian City State, 1297-1797*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 2000, pp. 137-167.

²¹ T. ASTARITA, *The Continuity of Feudal Power. The Caracciolo of Brienza in Spanish Naples*, Cambridge University Press, New York 1992; T. ASTARITA, *Village Justice, Community, Family and Popular Culture in Early Modern Italy*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1999; D. CERERE, *Suppliche, resistenze, protesta popolare. Le forme della lotta politica nella Calabria del Settecento*, in ‘Quaderni Storici’ XLVI (138/December 2011), pp. 765-796; T. J. DANDELET - J. A. MARINO (eds.), *Spain in Italy. Politics, Society and Religion 1500-1700*, cit., pp. 3-10; J. A. MARINO, *The Rural World in Italy under Spanish Rule*, in T. DANDELET - J. A. MARINO, eds., *Spain in Italy. Politics, Society and Religion 1500-1700*, cit., pp. 407-429; A. SPAGNOLETTI, *Le istituzioni statali e il potere locale nel regno di Napoli (1730-1780)*, in ‘Archivio storico per le province napoletane’, LXXXIV(1994), pp. 7-28.

²² J. A. MARINO, *Becoming Neapolitan. Citizen Culture in Baroque Naples*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 2011, p. 3. See also R. VILLARI, *Un sogno di libertà. Napoli del declino di un impero*, Mondadori, Milan 2012.

²³ A. L. BULGARELLI, *La gestione delle risorse collettive nel regno di Napoli in età moderna: un percorso comparativo*, in G. ALFANI - R. RAO (eds.), *La gestione delle risorse collettive. Italia settentrionale secoli XII-XVIII*, FrancoAngeli Editore, Milan 2011; N. ALIANELLI, *Delle consuetudini e degli Statuti municipali delle provincie napoletane*, Stabilimento Tipografico Rocco, Naples 1873, pp. 12-17

²⁴ CUOCO, *Fragment 1*; M. ROMANO, *Ricerche su Vincenzo Cuoco*, L. Colitti & Figli, Isernia 1904, pp. 67-68.

of the crown). With their practical ambitions frustrated, reformers could see little hope for the future other than in a radical, wholesale renovation of the entire fabric of society. In these circumstances, the appeal of the French Revolution became irresistible, tending also to disassociate the love of country from the love of the king. A case in point is Pietro Colletta (1775-1831)²⁵, a Neapolitan general and historian, who took part in the campaign against the French in 1798; by 1799, his love of country led him to adhere to the republic²⁶.

Cuoco was acutely aware of the deadening effect of the feudal heritage on the political, economic and social development of the Kingdom of Naples. But he could never view Jacobinism as other than an excessively abstract and alien ideology. In this, he was out of line with most of his fellow intellectuals. As early as 1792 we see Masonic lodges transformed into Jacobin clubs²⁷. And with the advance of the French revolutionary armies through Italy in the later 1790s, hopes were raised of the formation of a republic on the French model²⁸.

2. What Kind of Revolution was the Neapolitan Revolution?

Successive generations of scholars have clarified what events since the seventeenth century can be considered revolutions, why they happen and what are their outcomes. There is a general agreement in the literature that the defining feature of social and political revolutions in Europe and Asia is a major and sharp structural and ideological break from the previous regime. The disagreement is in identifying the causes. The particularities of each revolution have played a part in fostering different interpretations of why revolutions happen and with what results. Equally, variations in interpretation are also due to the particular frameworks of analysis that inform research. As a result, we now have many different explanatory currents: some focus on class-based conflict and subsequent modifications; others on the inability of state officials to meet societal demands (the classic modernization thesis); some others on the imbalance between the institutions and the environment that cannot be overcome (demography); and, more recently still, on state modernization itself creating enough societal expectations as necessary steps leading to revolution²⁹. The tendency to identify a single factor that explains the occurrence of revolution is difficult to resist. It often comes with the recognition that “the analytical language [of a particular researcher] has been used to disguise political preferences³⁰”. Work on “dynamics of contention” has tended to reject any kind of single-factor theory of revolution to advance the argument that large scale social outcomes are the result of the concatenation of a diverse range of mechanisms and processes as well as time and place contingencies.³¹

²⁵ Colletta's life, complex character and devotion to liberty are ably sketched by John Davis in his introduction to the 2009 reprint of Colletta's two-volume account of *The History of the Kingdom of Naples*. See J. A. DAVIS, “Introduction,” in P. COLLETTA, *The History of the Kingdom of Naples*, vol. 1, I. B. Tauris, London 2009, pp. ix-xxxiv.

²⁶ P. COLLETTA, *History of the Kingdom of Naples 1734-1825*, vol. 1, Hamilton Adams, London 1858[1838]; chaps. 2 and 3; A.M. RAO, “La repubblica napoletana del 1799,” in G. GALASSO - R. ROMEO (eds.), *Storia del Mezzogiorno. Il regno dagli Angioini ai Borboni*, Edizioni del Sole; Naples 1986. P. Villani, V. Cuoco, *Saggio Storico sulla rivoluzione napoletana del 1799*, 2nd ed. Laterza, Bari 1976[1806]; J. H. ELLIOTT, *History in the Making*, Yale University Press, New Haven 2012.

²⁷ G. GALASSO, *La filosofia in soccorso de' governi. La cultura napoletana dei Settecento*, Guida Editore, Naples 1989, pp. 509-548; G. GIARRIZZO, *Massoneria e Illuminismo nell'Europa del Settecento*, Marsilio, Padua 1994, chap. 14; N. NICOLINI, *Le origini del giacobinismo napoletano*, in ‘Rivista storica italiana’ IV (V, March 1939), pp. 3-41; C. Petraccone, “Il giacobinismo napoletano,” in M.L. SALVADORI - N. TRANFAGLIA (eds.), *Il Modello politico giacobinismo e le rivoluzioni*, La Nuova Italia, Florence 1984, pp. 132-153.

²⁸ J. A. DAVIS, *Naples and Napoleon: Southern Italy and the European Revolutions*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2006, pp. 71-93. For a general overview, see D. CANTIMORI, *Giacobini Italiani*, 2 vol., Laterza, Bari 1956; R. DE FELICE, *Il Triennio Giacobino in Italia (1796-1799)*, Bonacci, Rome 1990.

²⁹ For a review of the literature: J. GOLDSTONE, “Revolution,” in T. LANDMAN - N. ROBINSON (eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Comparative Politics*, Sage, Los Angeles 2008, pp. 319-347; S. PINCUS, *1688. The First Modern Revolution*, Yale University Press, New Haven 2009; T. SKOCPOL, *States and Social Revolutions*, Cambridge University Press, New York 1979. And, ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE's *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*.

³⁰ S. PINCUS, *1688. The First Modern Revolution*, Yale University Press, New Haven 2009, p. 32.

³¹ D. MCADAM - S. TARROW - C. TILLY, *Dynamics of Contention*, Cambridge University Press, New York 2001.

The Neapolitan revolution of 1799 and surrounding events have generated a sizeable literature, highlighting the concatenation of mechanisms and processes that led to the events of 1799. Even though the restored Bourbon king ordered the destruction of documentary evidence that sent many patriots to the scaffold, not all archival sources were destroyed and many others remain untouched.³² The anniversary celebrations in 1899 and 1999 spurred new research. Working from different perspectives and pursuing different interests, historians have displayed considerable ingenuity in tapping these sources and reinterpreting earlier conclusions.³³ Historians like Anna Maria Rao and Pasquale Villani have dedicated a large portion of their professional lives to researching the background, context, personalities and groups involved in the Neapolitan revolution.³⁴ As a result, we now have more information on the events and the dynamics of the time than what was available to the leading participants themselves. This richness of documentation has lent more nuanced findings of the concatenation of events and interpretations of the revolution.

Cuoco's *Historical Essay* points to the richly complex chain of events that locked contrasting personalities in the making and unmaking of the revolution in 1799. Interspersed in the narrative of the first five chapters there are sufficient details for the reader to gain an understanding of the domestic and international context.

The creation of the kingdom of Two Sicilies in 1734 marked a turning point in the history of the South. It signified the union of the crowns of Naples and Sicily under an independent dynastic monarchy ruled by a branch of the Spanish Bourbon. It also generated considerable expectations about economic and political reform and progress. The monarchy's policies, including efforts to modernize and professionalize the army by ending the monopoly of the nobility over commissioned officers, were not free of opposition and the implementation was not without difficulty. But there was little doubt that a new era seems to have set in as succeeding rulers - Charles III, Ferdinand IV and his Austrian queen Maria Carolina - seemed open to, and cautiously supportive of, Enlightenment and progress. The French revolution, the deposition and trial of Louis XVI, the guillotine of the king and the queen, a sister of Maria Carolina of Naples, and the increasingly aggressive gunboat diplomacy of the new French government in the Mediterranean and the various efforts to promote and spread Jacobin ideas among intellectuals and nobles in Naples – all combined to make the Neapolitan king and his queen fierce adversaries of the new political order in France. This hostility, fueled by fear of Jacobin sympathy in Naples, led to several unwise government actions at home and abroad. The fate of the king and his court was sealed when the French army already in the papal states marched toward Naples in January 1799.

Cuoco recounts in vivid detail what happened with the fall of the monarchy in 1799. Three unique features make the Neapolitan revolution stand out in a comparative perspective.

First, the creation of the republic in 1799 was possible only by foreign arms.³⁵ It is generally accepted that the revolution owed less to popular initiative than to French military

³² S. PALMIERI, 'Le abominevoli carte formate in tempo dell'abattuta anarchia.' *La tradizione documentaria della Repubblica napoletana*, in 'Archivio storico per le province napoletane', CXVI(1998), pp.155-173.

³³ A. CESTARO (eds.), *La rivoluzione napoletana del 1799 nelle province in relazione alle vicende storiche dell'Italia giacobina e napoleonica (1799-1815)*, Atti del convegno di Maratea 15-17 novembre 1999, Edizioni Osanna, Venosa 2002; T. PEDIO, *La congiura giacobina del 1794 nel Regno di Napoli*, Edizioni Levante, Bari 1986.

³⁴ A. M. RAO, *The Neapolitan Revolution of 1799*, in 'Journal of Modern Italian Studies' 4(3/1999), pp. 358-369; A. M. RAO, *La rivoluzione napoletana del 1799 nel quadro del triennio repubblicano italiano*, in A. CESTARO (ed. by), *La rivoluzione napoletana del 1799 nelle province in relazione alle vicende storiche dell'Italia giacobina e napoleonica (1799-1815)*, Edizioni Osanna, Venosa 2002, pp. 35-64; A. M. RAO - P. VILLANI, eds., *Napoli 1799-1815. Dalla Repubblica alla Monarchia amministrativa*, Edizioni del Sole, Naples 1995; J. A. DAVIS, *Naples and Napoleon: Southern Italy and the European Revolutions*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2006.

³⁵ A. DE FRANCESCO, *How not to finish a revolution*, in G. Imbruglia, eds., *Naples in the Eighteenth Century. The Birth and Death of a Nation State*, Cambridge University Press, New York 2000, pp. 167-182; A. PAGDEN, *Francesco Mario*

supremacy. Indeed we have the paradoxical spectacle of a revolution that was designed to advance the lot of the common people being greeted by either indifference or outright hostility. Indifference or hostility stood in sharp contrast with the good intentions of the revolutionaries. In the few months of rule, the revolutionaries legislated all sorts of positive changes aimed at transforming the entire face of the South. Cuoco captures well this rush to legislate and one modern analyst who has examined the various parliamentary bills describes the work as “immense.”³⁶ Much of the legislative program could not be implemented. Time was not on the side of revolutionaries. The republic lasted only so long as the French were able to afford military protection, a bare five months.

Second, for the first time the armies of the revolution were defeated by popular resistance.³⁷ The inchoate popular resistance was given organizational shape and direction through the efforts and leadership of Cardinal Fabrizio Ruffo. He landed in Calabria in February 1799 to organize the anti-republican movement, which became known by the pejorative name of *sanfedismo*. Cuoco and Colletta, like many other analysts since then, have tended to paint Cardinal Ruffo in the most negative of terms; they have downplayed the challenges and difficulties Ruffo faced in confronting organized resistance in the context of different and conflicting pressures coming from several sources. Ruffo’s success was not automatic, and historian John Davis has recently drawn attention to Ruffo’s predicament. Ruffo “saw himself in the midst of two wars. One was being fought between the barons and *ceto medio*, whom the Republic had divided into opposing factions, or whose pre-existing factional alliances had regrouped along the division between royalists and republicans. The other was the war being fought by the people, and Ruffo agreed that they suffered intolerable burdens (*soverchi aggravi*). But these burdens could not be lessened without alienating the landowners and provoking a social war that could not be controlled”.³⁸ That Ruffo succeeded is a tribute to his skills.

By way of contrast, the creation of “the patriotic salons,” discussed by Cuoco in chapter XI, was not enough to generate widespread public support for the revolutionary government. When the French army was forced to withdraw, the “patriots” were swept aside. A brutal reaction, led by leaders of the church and nobility and abetted by British naval power, restored the Bourbon monarchy to the throne. The fierce traditionalism of the peasants and the *lazzaroni* of Naples had been exploited to rid the Kingdom of Naples of the only group that had shown any concern for improving the way of life of the lower orders of society³⁹. A generation of intellectuals was killed, imprisoned or exiled.

Finally, this very failure and disaster made the Neapolitan revolution stand out in other ways. One was suggested by Benedetto Croce. He acknowledged “the superficiality of the revolutionary patriots,” “their innocent confidence in the redemptive powers of France,” “their errors of judgment, the childishness of some of their actions, and the weaknesses of some of their leaders.” But he put more emphasis on their “concrete accomplishments” and “their truly generous faith” this way:

Pagano's 'Republic of Virtue': Naples 1799, in B. FONTANA (eds.), *The Invention of the Modern Republic*, Cambridge University Press, London 1994, pp. 139-140.

³⁶ A. DE FRANCESCO, *L'Italia di Bonaparte. Politica, statualità e nazione della penisola tra due rivoluzioni, 1796-1821*, UTET, Turin 2011, p.24.

³⁷ J. A. DAVIS, 1799. *The 'Sanfedede' and the crisis of the 'ancien regime' in Southern Italy*, in J. A. DAVIS - P. GINSBORG (eds.), *Society and Politics in the Age of the Risorgimento. Essays in Honor of Denis Mack Smith*, Cambridge University Press, New York 1991, pp. 1-25; J. A. DAVIS, *Naples and Napoleon: Southern Italy and the European Revolutions*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2006, p. 119; see also chap. XXXV.

³⁸ J. A. DAVIS, *Naples and Napoleon: Southern Italy and the European Revolutions*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2006, p. 119.

³⁹ M. L. SALVADORI - N. TRANFAGLIA, *Il Modello politico giacobino e le rivoluzioni*, Nuova Italia, Scandacci, Florence 1984; J. A. DAVIS, *Naples and Napoleon: Southern Italy and the European Revolutions*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2006, pp. 107-126.

When I think of the exiles from Calabria, Abruzzo, Basilicata, Apulia and Naples who discussed burning political problems in the newspapers, pamphlets, and flyers circulating in the Cisalpine Republic; who joined the newly formed Italian legions or signed up with the French or some local democratic government; when I read documents which testify to the friendships which they struck up with Lombards, Piedmontese, Ligurians and Venetians, then I say to myself: 'Here's the birth of modern Italy, the new Italy, our Italy'⁴⁰.

For Croce the human tragedy and the political disaster of revolution were on the path of progress and human liberty.

The work of Cuoco on the revolution added light and instruction in another way. Despite his reservations about Jacobin ideas, he had participated in the revolution alongside the republicans. Following the reaction, he found himself briefly imprisoned and finally condemned to exile. Unexpected circumstances provided the conditions for Cuoco to distill the essential political lessons of the abortive revolution. Paul Rahe's recent reflections about political failure put Cuoco's lessons in a broad comparative context and are worth quoting at some length:

There is not much to be said for political failure, but it does have one compensation. With some frequency, it provides not only occasion for reflection but the requisite time. Had he succeeded as a general, Thucydides would never have managed to compose his history of the Peloponnesian War. Had the Medici retained Niccolò Machiavelli in his post as secretary of the Second Chancery in Florence, he would never have written *The Prince* and his *Discourses on Livy*. Had civil war not broken out in England, Thomas Hobbes would not have produced his *Leviathan*. And had Alexis de Tocqueville's attempt to frame a practicable constitution for the Second Republic in France proven effectual and had its second President not mounted a coup against the regime Tocqueville served as Foreign Secretary, the latter would not have resigned his post, abandoned the political arena, and penned his *Ancien Régime and the Revolution*. In truth, had none of these disasters taken place, we, the intellectual heirs of these philosophical historians and political theorists, would have been much the poorer⁴¹.

Cuoco's *Historical Essay on the Neapolitan Revolution of 1799* was first published in Milan in 1801, alongside the *Fragments*. He published a second edition in 1806, pruning rhetorical passages, reworking the narrative to make it more detached in light of subsequent events on the peninsula, thereby giving his account more credibility, persuasiveness and staying power⁴². It was, in fact, the second edition that we publish that established the terms of reference through which a generation of theorists would interpret the revolution; but, more importantly, it introduced the Italian reading public to the wider issues that dominated political discussion in the post-revolutionary period⁴³.

3. Lessons?

The influence of the *Saggio storico* extends far beyond Cuoco's generation or the problems they confronted. While his impact on the Risorgimento was pervasive, he continued to be widely read and admired in the twentieth century by theorists of widely differing political views. From Gentile on the right, through de Ruggiero and Croce, to Gramsci on the left, Cuoco has been

⁴⁰ B. CROCE, *History of the Kingdom of Naples*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1970 [1925], pp. 201.

⁴¹ P. A. RAHE, "Review of Alexis de Tocqueville's *The Ancien Régime and the French Revolution* ed. Jon Elster," in *H-France Review*, 12(53/April 2012), pp.1-5.

⁴² M. PARIGI, *Per una rilettura del 'Saggio Storico sulla rivoluzione Napoletana del 1799' di Vincenzo Cuoco*, in 'Archivio Storico Italiano', CXXXV (491-492/1977), pp. 217-256; Tessitori cited in P. VILLANI, "Introduzione," in V. Cuoco (1806), *Saggio Storico sulla Rivoluzione di Napoli*, BUR Rizzoli, Milan 2004 [1966], pp. 14-22.

⁴³ B. HADDOCK, *State, Nation and Risorgimento*, in G. BEDANI - B. HADDOCK (eds.), *The Politics of Italian National Identity*, University of Wales Press, Cardiff 2000, pp. 11-49. For quite some time, the first edition was unavailable or difficult to consult. This problem has been remedied through the efforts of Fulvio Tessitore with his edition of the 1801 version published by Itinerario in Naples in 1988; and A. DE FRANCESCO, ed., V. Cuoco. *Saggio Storico sulla Rivoluzione di Napoli*. 1st ed., Lacaita Editore, Manduria 1998 [1801], while acknowledging the importance that the revised 1806 edition occupies. De Francesco is now republishing an annotated version of the 1801 edition.

seen as a seminal source of ideas. In general terms his appeal is undoubtedly in his acute awareness of a distinctively Italian political tradition, with roots in history and jurisprudence rather than mathematics, logic and the natural sciences. Yet on certain crucial substantive issues, too, his ideas can be seen to have established the terms of reference for subsequent commentators. Croce, for example, in his influential *History of the Kingdom of Naples*, endorsed not only the broad lines of Cuoco's interpretation of the Neapolitan Revolution but used his contrast between the political culture of an intellectual elite and the traditional assumptions of popular culture as a key to the understanding of the lack of political, social and economic development in the south⁴⁴.

Gramsci, too, went back to Cuoco for a distinction that has been widely used in recent interpretations of Italian political history. Cuoco described the events of the Neapolitan Revolution as a "passive revolution" (that is, an attempt by an elite to impose a set of radical changes upon a society in the face of popular attachment to the status quo). Gramsci used a modified version of Cuoco's idea to explain the course of the Risorgimento, in particular, the view that moderates were able to exploit the lack of effective political leadership on the part of radicals in order to establish a unified state on terms that served their interests⁴⁵. And the idea has been taken up to explain not only the implicitly authoritarian character of the liberal regime but also the specific direction of the so-called "fascist revolution." Gramsci's stress on the importance of cultural hegemony in a revolutionary movement can be read as a response to the problems that Cuoco had seen as necessarily involved in any attempt to impose revolution from above.

Cuoco's *Historical Essay* is thus a seminal work that has suffered unjustified neglect, especially in the English-speaking world. Writing a widely read survey of modern Western political thought in the 1970s, Dante Germino observed that Cuoco "deserves to be rescued from the neglect he has suffered everywhere outside Italy."⁴⁶ Our concern with this translation of the text is to redress the balance, at least in a preliminary fashion. Students of revolution, constitutional politics, moderation and democratic pragmatism can see for themselves the extent to which Cuoco's reflections and insights lend support, give historical and analytical depth to, and even extend their own inquiries.⁴⁷

The book opens with a declaration that sets the tone for the entire text. Cuoco declares that he has undertaken "to write the history of a revolution which intended to bring about the happiness of a nation, but in fact caused its ruin."⁴⁸ What we are presented with is not a sweeping condemnation of the ideas, ambitions and motives of the revolutionaries⁴⁹ but an analysis of the way noble ideals were undermined simply because they were formulated without regard for the constraints that established manners and customs imposed on the scope for political change. The mood is that of remorse or regret rather than contempt; and the intention is to glean such lessons

⁴⁴ B. CROCE, *History of the Kingdom of Naples*, cit. Croce's view is challenged in J. A. Davis, *Naples and Napoleon: Southern Italy and the European Revolutions*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2006.

⁴⁵ A. GRAMSCI, *Il Risorgimento*, Einaudi, Turin 1966.

⁴⁶ D. GERMINO, *Modern Western Political Thought. Machiavelli to Marx*, Rand and McNally, Chicago 1972, p. 232.

⁴⁷ P. D. ALIGICA - P. J. BOETTKE, *Challenging Institutional Analysis and Development. The Bloomington School*, Routledge, New York 2009; A. CRAIUTU, *A Virtue for Courageous Minds. Moderation in French Political Thought, 1748-1830*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2012; J. KNIGHT - J. JOHNSON, *The Priority of Pragmatism. Political Consequences of Pragmatism*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2011; S. PINCUS, *1688. The First Modern Revolution*, Yale University Press, New Haven; P. A. RAHE, *Soft Despotism, Democracy's Drift. Montesquieu, Rousseau, Tocqueville and the Modern Prospect*, Yale University Press, New Haven 2009; cf. V. OSTROM, *The Compound Republic. Designing the American Experiment*, 3rd ed. with B. Allen, Lexington Books, Lanham 2008.

⁴⁸ V. CUOCO, *Historical Essay*, chap. 1, p. 14; Italian reference, *Saggio Storico sulla Rivoluzione Napoletana del 1799*, 2nd ed. by N. Cortese, Vallecchi Editore, Florence 1926 [1806], chap. 1, p. 74; henceforth cited as *Saggio Storico*, ed. N. Cortese.

⁴⁹ Such as we find in E. BURKE, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. A. J. Grieve, Dent, London 1967, or in J. DE MAISTRE, *Considerations on France*, trans. R. A. Lebrun, McGill Queen's University Press, Montreal 1974.

from the disaster as would enable future plans for institutional reform to be set upon a secure foundation.

Cuoco's distance from Burke is especially evident in his treatment of the established Bourbon regime. Where Burke had been concerned to minimize the abuses of the *ancien regime* in order to heighten the absurdity of revolutionary ideas, Cuoco painted a picture of a Kingdom of Naples desperately in need of reform. Everything from the administrative apparatus of the kingdom, through the system of landholding, to the manners and habits of the leading classes, is found wanting. In the administration, for example, though everything was notionally centralized, there was no effective Council of State to coordinate the activities of the different ministries. What we have, in effect, is a system whereby ministers would be in competition with each other for the ear of the King or (as was more often the case in Naples at this time) the Queen. The crown had debilitated the public spirit of the nation by concentrating more and more functions at the centre; yet though everything depended on the government, the government in fact had neither the knowledge nor the resources to take effective action.⁵⁰

In the financial field, too, the needs of the court had grown while the nation's ability to sustain a high level of taxation had diminished. From this vicious circle there seemed to be no escape. As the crisis deepened, the court had recourse to ever more desperate measures, culminating in the resort to worthless paper credit that simply served to undermine business confidence still further. The only group to do well out of the situation were lawyers, described by Cuoco as "wasps" living off the honest endeavors of ordinary citizens⁵¹. On top of these structural factors, we have the personalities of the King and Queen themselves – the King weak and indolent, the Queen a radical anti-Jacobin unable to distinguish her personal likes and dislikes from matters of state. In Cuoco's account, the queen and the English-born minister, Acton, are very much the villains of the piece. It was at their bidding that a *Giunta di Stato* was established, charged with investigating such shocking crimes as discussing the political ideas emanating from France.⁵²

Cuoco describes the functioning of this political inquisition in some detail – the castles and prisons full of victims whose only crimes were the political opinions they were suspected of entertaining. "Almost all of them", he says, "emerged free as innocent men four years later" as if nothing had happened.⁵³ But the effect of the persecution took its toll on the political culture of the Kingdom: "... people will never understand, and never follow philosophers. But if you persecute opinions, these turn into emotions. Emotions produce enthusiasm; and enthusiasm is communicated. Those who are persecuted become hostile, so too those who fear persecution, and the neutral man who condemns it. Ultimately, the persecuted opinion becomes widespread and triumphant."⁵⁴

The attempt to eradicate heterodox political ideas through persecution had thus proved to be counterproductive. The use of violence as a means of controlling ideas had merely served to mould a host of disparate opinions into a cohesive political movement. In taking this course of action, the Bourbons of Naples had repeated the mistake of the other royal houses of Europe. By attributing overriding importance to the ideas of revolutionaries, the sovereigns of Europe had exposed themselves to a ferment which (since it had its roots in opinion) would be satisfied by nothing less than the wholesale reconstruction of the political order. Cuoco also noted the prudent response shown at the time of the American Revolution. The ideas of the American revolutionaries had been very similar to those of the French; and yet the "court of Naples had publicly applauded" that revolution.⁵⁵ No one, it seems, "had been afraid that the Neapolitans

⁵⁰ V. CUOCO, *Historical Essay*, chap. VI, also in *Saggio Storico* ed. N. Cortese, chap. VII.

⁵¹ V. CUOCO, *ibid.*, chap. 9, p. 57; *Saggio Storico* ed. N. Cortese, chap. IX, p. 128.

⁵² V. CUOCO, *ibid.*, chap. VI.

⁵³ V. CUOCO, *ibid.*, chap. VI, 34; in *Saggio Storico* ed. N. Cortese, chap. VI, p. 98.

⁵⁴ V. CUOCO, *ibid.*, chap. VI, p. 32; in *Saggio Storico* N. Cortese, chap. VI, p. 95.

⁵⁵ V. CUOCO, *ibid.*, chap. VII, p. 39; in *Saggio Storico* ed. N. Cortese, chap. VII, p. 104.

might want to imitate the revolutionaries of Virginia.”⁵⁶ The danger to the sovereigns had simply grown in proportion to their fears, for “a revolution is defeated by the one who fears it least.”⁵⁷ Once the first steps had been taken in France in 1789, the revolution seemed to gather a momentum of its own. The inexorable progression from liberal, through democratic, to authoritarian forms of government in the years between 1789 and 1793 was interpreted, by both supporters and opponents of the regime alike, as a practical illustration of the implications of the ideas that had first inspired the events of 1789. But, says Cuoco, this is a misconception, and one which had fateful consequences for the political stability of Europe. “The French deluded themselves over the nature of their revolution, and believed that the effect of the political circumstances in which their nation found itself, was caused by philosophy itself.”⁵⁸

France in the *ancien regime* had appeared to be an absolute monarchy, with the central power imposing order and coherence on the subordinate functions of government. In reality, however, French society was a tissue of abuses and contradictions, the most glaring example being the conflict between monarchy and aristocracy that had dominated political life for some three hundred years. A plausible ideology had effectively bottled things up by presenting the society as if its various institutions and practices were so bound up with one another that amendment of one could not be undertaken without full consideration of the consequences for society as a whole. As abuses continued to grow in number and increase in range, so the principles that justified reform became more abstract. In trying to fashion an abstract ideology that would embrace a whole series of practical issues, the revolutionaries were simply responding in kind to royalist ideology. “The French”, Cuoco writes, “were forced to deduce their principles from the most abstract metaphysics, and fell into the error to which men who follow abstract ideas are excessively prone – that is, to confuse their own ideas with the laws of nature. They believed that everything they had done or wanted to do was the duty and right of all men.”⁵⁹

Here, in a nutshell, we have it. By divorcing ideas from the real needs of society, both royalists and revolutionaries had cut themselves off from any prospect of improving (or even understanding) the society they were trying to mould. And while it had become customary to pour scorn on the naïve rationalism of the Jacobins, Cuoco insists that the particular cast of revolutionary ideology was a natural product of the French political tradition.

Cuoco offers us a tantalizing sketch of what would later be described as “path-dependency” in political science. His focus is very much on the terms of reference that shape everyday engagement with the social and political world. Modern political theorists associate the view with Alexis de Tocqueville’s influential *Ancien Regime and the French Revolution*, written in the 1850s, where the logic of centralized control and reform imposes a similar style of governance on both despots and revolutionaries, each bent on orchestrating their programs from the centre, often with little understanding of the consequences that might distort the impact of reforms in practice.⁶⁰

How and why centralized regimes emerged in early modern European history is a complex story in itself, triggered by security issues both domestically and internationally. A clear implication, however, in both Cuoco and Tocqueville, is that the conventional wisdom at the centre of political regimes represents a very narrow world of ideas. What is taken for enlightenment is very much elite driven, insensitive to context and tradition. Experience of centralized government engenders complex accommodation that may be more or less efficient. Where established governmental practice has been customarily more devolved, elite-driven reform may well become chronically dysfunctional at local level, despite the best of intentions.

⁵⁶ V. CUOCO, *ibid.*; *Saggio Storico* ed. N. Cortese, chap. VII, p. 104.

⁵⁷ V. CUOCO, *ibid.*, chap. VII, p.43; in *Saggio Storico* ed. N. Cortese, chap. VII, pp. 109-110.

⁵⁸ V. CUOCO, *ibid.*, chap. VII, p. 39; *Saggio Storico* ed. N. Cortese, chap. VII, p. 104.

⁵⁹ V. CUOCO, *ibid.*, chap VII, p. 41; in *Saggio Storico* ed. N. Cortese, chap. VII, p. 107.

⁶⁰ A. de Tocqueville, *The Ancien Regime and the French Revolution*, trans. G. Bevan, Penguin Books, London 2008 [1856].

Cuoco presses the point further, focusing specifically on the cultural gulf that separates elites from the wider population. The French Revolution had been understood by only a few, fewer still actually approved of it, and hardly anyone wanted to see it imitated; but even if a revolution on the French model had been deemed desirable, it would still have been fruitless because “no revolution is possible without the people, and the people are not moved by ratiocination but by need.”⁶¹ The needs of the Neapolitan people were so different from the French that the particular arguments advanced by the revolutionaries seemed abstruse, wild and incomprehensible. As regards the intellectuals, Cuoco claims that “the majority of them would never have approved of the French revolutionaries’ theories.”⁶² The Italian tradition in moral and political thought had followed a quite different path.⁶³ The trend had been to relate consideration of political ideas to close study of historical circumstances. A lead had been given by Machiavelli, Gravina and Vico; and anyone who had profited from their works would find themselves estranged from both the theory and practice of the French revolutionaries.⁶⁴

Given the striking divide between French and Italian political traditions, how could it come about that a generation of reformist intellectuals should transform themselves into Jacobin revolutionaries? Cuoco’s answer is simple.

The first mistake had been to try to suppress ideas rather than to put them to the test of experience. Cuoco here recalled how an old diplomat, the marquis Gallo, responded when he saw the list of conspirators that had been drawn up. He suggested to the king that they be sent to France for he predicted, “if they are Jacobins,...they will come back royalists.”⁶⁵ The second was to identify the fortune of the Bourbon rulers of Naples too directly with that of the *ancien regime* in France. The combined effect was that theoretical differences on specific points, or interest in particular practical proposals that had been advanced in France, would be interpreted as evidence of total rejection of Bourbon rule in Naples in the name of Jacobin principles. In truth, Neapolitan intellectuals became “Jacobins” only because they recognized that little could be expected in the way of concrete reform from a timorous and obscurantist monarchy. When intellectuals welcomed the invading French army as the harbinger of political change, they had merely accepted the characterization of events that their own ruling house had foisted upon them.

The impact of the new Jacobin principles on the political life of the kingdom, however, was doubly unfortunate. In the first place, the ideas themselves had little to recommend them. A political theory that always appealed to abstract principles in the evaluation of institutions and practices could never be other than destructive.⁶⁶ The view that wisdom could be acquired through experience was anathema to the man of “principle”. He could not accept that political judgment was a matter of striking a fine balance between the theoretical desirability of certain reforms and the entrenched habits and customs that would inevitably modify whatever proposal a philosopher had dreamed up. In the last resort, the ideologist would lose patience with the world. If practical men refused to listen to the voice of “reason”, then it would behove men who could see things aright to compel them to come to their senses. The practical implication of an abstract political theory (as the French Revolution had illustrated so vividly) was terror.

These sinister implications did not have time to work themselves out in the Neapolitan Revolution. The fledgling republic, hampered as it was by the adoption of an untenable ideology, was further constrained by the alien origin of the newly dominant ideas. Access to French ideas

⁶¹ V. CUOCO, *ibid.*, chap. VII, p. 42; in *Saggio Storico* ed. N. Cortese, chap. VII, p. 108.

⁶² V. CUOCO, *ibid.*; *Saggio Storico* ed. N. Cortese, chap. VII, p. 108.

⁶³ See also F. SABETTI, *Italian Political Thought*, in G. T. Kurian (ed.), *International Encyclopedia of Political Science*, CQ Press, Washington DC 2011, pp. 1-8.

⁶⁴ V. CUOCO, *ibid.*, chap. VII; *Saggio Storico* ed. N. Cortese, chap. VII.

⁶⁵ V. CUOCO, *ibid.*, chap. VII, p. 43; *Saggio Storico* ed. N. Cortese, chap. VII, p. 109.

⁶⁶ G. KLOSKO, *Jacobins and Utopians. The Political Theory of Fundamental Moral Reforms*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, Indiana 2003.

had only ever been open to an intellectual elite. Instead of hailing the rejection of tyranny, the common people could only deplore the destruction of a distinctive way of life. The “patriots” had been relatively sanguine about their task: because their innovations had been designed to improve the lot of the common people, they had assumed that they would be greeted with enthusiasm. They found to their cost, however, that “to devise plans for a republican constitution is not the same thing as to establish a republic.”⁶⁷ The idea that government should express the public will is itself noble; but in the Neapolitan context, where political life was still identified in the popular mind with royal discretion, the state of popular culture made talk of a “public will” purely fanciful. As Cuoco put the point, “the only way to promote freedom is by forming free men.”⁶⁸ The principal obstacle to such an achievement was popular culture itself – the traditional picture of public life as an elaborate network of personal relationships, the customs and prejudices that supported the privileges of the nobility and clergy; and these obstacles to change would only be overcome if one had first taken the trouble to understand precisely how the different aspects of a culture were mutually supported in a complex way of life. To unlock the unused capacity of ordinary people calls for a revolution of the mind: “when a citizen no longer looks to earn his living from holding position; when serving one’s country ceases to be equated with making one’s fortune as is currently believed, you will have destroyed three-quarters of dangerous ambition.”⁶⁹ The abstract character of Jacobin thought, however, encouraged impatience. Traditional culture, in the Jacobin scheme of things, was simply a tissue of errors and superstitions. The only possible response to established institutions that failed to conform to the tenets of “reason” was to reject them. But in reacting in this rather crude way, the Jacobins had in effect cut themselves off from any real contact with the society they were striving to transform. Far from assisting the process of cultural transformation, they had merely accentuated the gulf that separated them from popular culture.

Here we come to the crux of the dilemma facing the Jacobins. Political leadership in the context of a spontaneous popular revolution would have been relatively straightforward. Enthusiasm would need to be harnessed, various initiatives would need to be coordinated, but the general objectives of the revolution would be shared by both the leaders and the led. No such cultural harmony existed at Naples. The success of the revolution depended upon the skill and efficiency with which a small elite could impose its will upon a scarcely comprehending populace. But the abstract philosophy that had sustained revolutionary ideology had little to say about purely tactical matters. The principal task in any “passive revolution”, according to Cuoco, should always be the molding of “popular opinion.”⁷⁰ Yet in reality the differences between the “patriots” and the populace were so vast – in terms of ideas, customs, manners and even languages – as to vitiate even the most basic communication. Publishing a newspaper in Neapolitan was not enough. The admiration for foreign ideas and customs, which had been such a marked feature of Neapolitan intellectual culture throughout the eighteenth century, could now be seen as “the greatest obstacle to the establishment of liberty.”⁷¹ In terms of everyday engagement, the Neapolitan nation was effectively divided into two peoples, separated by two centuries in terms of their levels of cultural development. The cultivated class had nurtured itself upon foreign models. Those who had remained faithful to Neapolitan traditions (the vast mass of the population) were entirely ignorant of modern culture. Thus we find that “the culture of the few had not benefited the nation as a whole”; while the populace “virtually despised a culture that was not beneficial to it and which it did not understand”⁷².

⁶⁷ V. CUOCO, *ibid.*, chap. XVI, p. 88; *Saggio Storico* ed. N. Cortese, chap. XVI, p. 170.

⁶⁸ V. CUOCO, *ibid.*, chap. XVI, p. 88; *Saggio Storico* ed. N. Cortese, chap. XVI, p. 170. See also M. ROMANO, *Ricerche su Vincenzo Cuoco*, L. Colitti & Figli, Isernia 1904, pp. 67-69.

⁶⁹ CUOCO, *Fragment* 6, p. 207.

⁷⁰ V. CUOCO, *ibid.*, chap. XVI, p. 91; *Saggio Storico*, ed. N. Cortese, chap. XVI, p. 174.

⁷¹ V. CUOCO, *ibid.* chap. XVI, 91; *Saggio Storico* ed. N. Cortese, chap. XVI, p. 174.

⁷² V. CUOCO, *ibid.*, chap. XVI, p. 94; *Saggio Storico* ed. N. Cortese, chap. XVI, p. 176.

In Cuoco's interpretation all the problems of the revolution can be traced back to this basic cultural divide. It was all very well to talk of a revolution in the interest of the people; but the lack of a common political culture meant that individuals interpreted that interest in their own way, leaving the *patria* a prey to ambition, indifference and malice. It was old-fashioned patriotic sentiment that had sustained the French revolutionary armies, not an abstract political ideology. Yet "far from having this national unity, the Neapolitan nation could be seen as divided into many different ones."⁷³ The kingdom had embraced a bewildering variety of cultures; and the feudal system, which had held the balance between anarchy and barbarism for centuries, had merely reflected the diversity of the established communities. The very first task of the revolutionaries should have been to fashion a coherent political culture out of these unlikely materials. Little could be done to make the doctrine of natural rights a political reality until the people themselves had come to associate their concrete interests with the new political creed. Everything should have been so contrived as to minimize the formal novelty of the new regime; and this could be achieved only by attending to the people's needs, not by trying to secure their rights.

What happened, however, was that the revolutionaries remained faithful to their ideas. If theoretical analysis had shown that established institutions were inadequate, then it behooved them to fashion the social and political world anew. But the commitment to change everything (Cuoco calls it an "obsession") inevitably brought with it the threat of counter-revolution.⁷⁴ As the revolutionaries sought to root out the abuses of the old regime, so the people would be deprived of the petty advantages that could be enjoyed under a corrupt and inefficient administration. It was the very zeal with which the republicans tried to impose a fair and equal legal system that led the people to complain of the new regime's rigor and severity. Law was evident to the multitude only as a constraint, a willful denial of the habitual practices of the old way of life. The advantages of a regular system of law would only manifest themselves in daily affairs after a period of peace and stability. Time, however, was the one thing the republic did not have on its side. The deposed Bourbons were waiting in Sicily, intent upon taking advantage of the first signs of popular unrest on the mainland. At the earliest opportunity they would return; and one could be sure that they would not make the mistake of relying on the people's judgment rather than their interest. Despotism, as Cuoco puts it, always depends upon the support of the "dregs of the people, who, with no care whatsoever for good or evil, sell themselves to whomsoever is best able to satisfy the needs of their bellies."⁷⁵

The mistake of the "patriots" had been to treat the creation of a republic as a moral crusade. Close readers of Machiavelli will recognize a familiar dilemma. The problems facing the founders of a "new" republic are similar in kind to those facing a "new" prince. In both cases the pressing task is to create a community of understanding or political culture that would sustain the new regime; and to this end it is essential that what is politically practicable should take precedence over what may be ideally desirable. The "patriots," however, continued to neglect "what is actually done for what should be done"; and they inevitably learnt "the way to self-destruction rather than self-preservation."⁷⁶

The Neapolitan republic had shown itself to be lamentably lacking in political realism. But the point Cuoco wants to stress is that the abstract nature of republican ideals effectively precluded the balanced appraisal of different courses of action that might have made a success of the revolution. Time and again the analysis comes back to the contrast between a purely theoretical view of politics and one that is attuned to the traditions of a community. The point is nicely illustrated in discussions of different conceptions of political liberty. The "patriots" would

⁷³ V. CUOCO, *ibid.*, chap. XVI, p. 92; *Saggio Storico*, ed. N. Cortese, chap. XVI, p. 179.

⁷⁴ V. CUOCO, *ibid.*, chap. XVII, pp. 96, 98; *Saggio Storico* ed. N. Cortese, chap. XVII, pp. 179 and 181.

⁷⁵ V. CUOCO, *ibid.*, chap. XVI, p. 94; *Saggio Storico* ed. N. Cortese, chap. XVI, p. 178.

⁷⁶ N. MACHIAVELLI, *The Prince*, ed. G. Bull, Penguin, Harmondsworth 1961.

insist that liberty is a good in itself. When we ask ourselves why people actually value liberty, however, we find that a host of other notions have to be introduced. Liberty is seen as a good precisely because it leads to other more tangible goods – such as security, a comfortable way of life, or a flourishing commerce. Indeed, in Cuoco's analysis, it is specifically because people enjoy concrete benefits that they come to love liberty.⁷⁷ The first concern of a new republican regime should have been to make some of the concrete advantages of liberty available to the people at large. By concentrating on the moral dimension of liberty, the “patriots” had effectively surrendered the political initiative to their Bourbon opponents.

The negative side of Cuoco's argument should by now be clear. Skepticism about the role of ideas in politics, combined with an analysis of the problems of political leadership, had led him to insist that any program of reform should have roots in a traditional culture. What we find on the positive side (though the point is less fully developed in the *Historical Essay* than elsewhere) is a stress on the importance of sound institutions for sustaining a flourishing political life. Where late eighteenth-century republican thought (largely derived from Rousseau) had set the virtuous individual at the centre of the political stage, Cuoco sounded a warning. In the Neapolitan Revolution virtue had been entirely on the side of the “patriots”; lacking a viable institutional framework, however, their best endeavors had proved to be self-destructive. Here was another Machiavellian insight (this time drawn from the *Discourses*) that had been obscured by the optimism of the eighteenth century.⁷⁸ In politics we can only take people as we find them and hope that individuals will channel their self-interest in directions that benefit the community as a whole. This might have seemed a disappointing conclusion if one had been brought up on utopian tracts promising heaven on earth; but theorists of the post-revolutionary generation had grown acutely conscious of the hidden pitfalls that could transform the best-intentioned reforms into sinister instruments of social control.

Cuoco focuses specifically on constitutional issues in the “fragments” of letters addressed to Vincenzo Russo published as Appendix I to the *Historical Essay*. The tone is sharply focused and more analytical than the treatment of the “patriots” in the body of the text. Consistent with the critique of rationalism that pervades the whole narrative, the *Fragments* make explicit basic assumptions that drive the analysis.⁷⁹

Some assumptions cluster around individuals. One, they are the basic or constituent units to be considered in the design of political institutions. Two, individuals are taken as they are, self-interested, and are presumed to seek to enhance their relative advantage. Three, human perfectibility is replaced with the assumption of human fallibility with capabilities for learning. Education then plays a chief role in the development of self-regulation and, correlatively, a resultant public spirit. For, individuals “more willingly correct themselves than allow themselves to be corrected by others.”⁸⁰ Other assumptions cluster around how to devise institutions in such a way that conditions of reason and justice can be sustained over time. Particularly *Fragments* 3 to 6 turn on what mechanisms create and maintain a logic of mutually productive relationships. Aware that the prerogatives of public authority create unique opportunities for individuals to pursue their advantages at the expense of others, Cuoco is sympathetic to what Pagano tried to do but thinks that he did not dig deep enough about human motivation, institutional arrangements and the practice of self-rule. Again, the problem is modeling Neapolitan institutions on those that do not quite fit local conditions.

Cuoco elaborates these points and defends his position through close criticism of Francesco Mario Pagano's proposals for a Neapolitan constitution, very much influenced by

⁷⁷ V. CUOCO, *ibid.*, XIX, p. 190, and *Fragment 6; Saggio Storico* ed. N. Cortese, chap. XIX, p. 190.

⁷⁸ N. MACHIAVELLI, *Il Principe e Discorsi*, ed. S. Bertelli, Feltrinelli, Milan 1960.

⁷⁹ Si veda anche F. BATTAGLIA, *L'Opera di Vincenzo Cuoco e la formazione dello spirito nazionale in Italia*, R. Bemporad & Figlio, Florence 1925.

⁸⁰ CUOCO, *Fragment 4*, p. 260.

successive French republican models.⁸¹ Whether Cuoco has faithfully interpreted Pagano is a contentious issue for some.⁸² Giole Solari, a distinguished thinker in his own right and a sympathetic student of Pagano's thought, noted earlier that Cuoco was "the most authoritative and fairest of his critics."⁸³ Certainly, the *Fragments* remain indispensable for a balanced interpretation of Cuoco's political theory and institutional analysis.

A central theme is the need to adapt constitutions to the manners and customs of a people. "Constitutions", argues Cuoco, "have to be made for men as they are, and as they forever will be, full of vices, full of errors; for it is as likely that they will want to give up their customs, which I believe to be second nature, to follow our institutions, which I believe to be arbitrary and variable, as it is reasonable for a shoemaker to demand to shorten the foot of someone for whom he had made a shoe that was too small."⁸⁴ A constitution "perfect" in theory would have to be applied to a society that had developed through tortuous adaptation of practices to circumstances over centuries. However sound a constitution might look on paper, it would inevitably be revised radically in practice if it survived for any length of time. A constitutional model for all people, anywhere, at any time, is simply inconceivable. Again adopting a homely analogy, Cuoco insists that "constitutions are like clothes: each individual, each age in which each individual lives, must have its own, which will not fit another if you try to give it to them."⁸⁵ While recognizing that the drafting of constitutions cannot be done by everyone, he recalls that the person who makes the shoe has to take into account the person who wears it, a homely analogy later dear to John Dewey.⁸⁶

From Cuoco's perspective, reform must be piecemeal, respecting established habits without being a slave to them. The rationalist project, by contrast, assumes that defensible change should satisfy the requirements of theory. Theory, however, is a very blunt instrument when confronted with the vagaries of everyday life. Cuoco's worry, echoing the reservations of Burke and de Maistre, is that "to want to reform everything is tantamount to wanting to destroy everything."⁸⁷ It is a recipe for permanent frustration and disappointment.

In terms of constitutional detail, Cuoco's preference, clearly expressed in the second *Fragment*, is that political representation should be "as closely linked to ... the people as possible."⁸⁸ He specifically counters Pagano's suggestion that each representative should represent the "Neapolitan nation as a whole."⁸⁹ In any such scheme, as Robespierre's experience in revolutionary France illustrates so vividly, the authority of the nation overwhelms the constituent interests of the various localities.

Cuoco focuses, instead, on the established institutions that have served communities in some sense over a significant time-span. Naples, he argues, idealizing considerably, has the "vestiges of ancient sovereignties", where communities were enabled to defend their interests

⁸¹ M. BATTAGLINI, *Mario Pagano e il progetto di Costituzione della Repubblica napoletana*, Archivio Guido Izzi, Rome 1994. See also A. Pagden, *Francesco Mario Pagano's 'Republic of Virtue': Naples 1799*, in B. FONTANA, ed., *The Invention of the Modern Republic*, Cambridge University Press, London 1994, pp. 139-153; Pagano's constitutional project in F. VENTURI, ed., *Riformatori Napoletani*, Ricciardi, Milan 1962; and the symposium on Pagano in *Pensiero Politico*, "Symposium on the work of Francesco Mario Pagano," 28 January-April 1995, with essays by E. Pii, L. Salvetti Firpo, R. Ajello, A. Colombo, and F. Mazzanti Pepe.

⁸² V. FERRONE, *The Politics of Enlightenment: Constitutionalism, Republicanism, and the Rights of Man in Gaetano Filangieri*, trans. S. A. Reinert, Anthem Press, New York 2012, pp. 153-175.

⁸³ G. SOLARI, *Studi su Francesco Mario Pagano*, ed. L. Firpo, Edizioni Giappichelli, Turin 1963 [1934], p. 289.

⁸⁴ CUOCO, *Fragment 1*, p. 228.

⁸⁵ CUOCO, *Fragment 1*, p. 227.

⁸⁶ CUOCO, *Fragment 1*, 228; John Dewey [1927], cited in V. OSTROM, *The Intellectual Crisis in American Public Administration*, 2nd ed., University of Alabama Press, Tuscaloosa 1989, p. 185, note 10.

⁸⁷ CUOCO, *Fragment 1*, p. 228.

⁸⁸ CUOCO, *Fragment 2*, p. 231.

⁸⁹ CUOCO, *Fragment 2*, p. 232.

“against the encroachment of the barons and tax authorities.”⁹⁰ It is, no doubt, stretching matters to liken Neapolitan traditions to the robust management of local responsibilities among the “peace-loving inhabitants of the Swiss mountains”, but Cuoco is adamant that municipal rather than national representation best secures interests and liberty.⁹¹

What is most intriguing about Cuoco’s position is that, despite his trenchant criticism of (what he sees as) French Jacobin theory, he positively endorses Rousseau’s crucial distinction between the “general will” and the “will of all”⁹². Following Rousseau to the letter, he insists that “the law is the general will;” but he is much more accommodating in his account of the “will of all”, recognizing that “each individual has their particular will”, and insisting that “freedom is no more than these two wills being in agreement.”⁹³ There is no suggestion that the “general will” trumps the “will of all”, or somehow embodies our better selves. And he explains the relationship between the two dimensions in terms of the practical accommodation that is evident in the extended development of communities. The particular wills of individuals always remain plural. If too many identify unconditionally with the singular will of the nation or state, the delicate balance between general and particular wills is undermined, leading to de facto tyranny even in the most enlightened of despotisms.

The priority should always be, in striking anticipation of the modern principle of subsidiarity, to ensure that interests are managed “by those who are most affected by them, and affected by them most closely.”⁹⁴ This is a pragmatic criterion. It does not guarantee a qualitative transformation of experience, but it facilitates informed consideration of matters of mutual concern. Above all, it is an institutionalized learning process, reducing the gulf between public and private interests that naturally develops in centralized systems.

With the benefit of hindsight, it is possible to argue that Cuoco may have pressed the argument against centralization too far. His claim that “establishing the Neapolitan republic is no more than a question of restoring matters to their former state” would have astonished generations of enlightened reformers for whom baronial privilege was the principal obstacle to change.⁹⁵ What he does grasp, however, is the complex interdependence that stems from regional differences and specialization. Allowing communities to develop in their own way contributes to a wider sum of benefits at national level. And it is simply the case that no central government is sufficiently enlightened to order priorities optimally from a local perspective. Local anomalies may demand central attention, but that is quite different, in Cuoco’s view, from central imposition of priorities and rules.

The specific thrust of the *Historical Essay* was a critique of what commentators, at least since Hume, have styled “rationalism in politics”⁹⁶. The central dilemma of Cuoco’s political theory is the dilemma that has come to be shared by classical liberalism: given the view of the limited role reason plays in social life, how is it possible to mount a systematic defense of reform without falling victim to the very kind of rationalism criticized?⁹⁷ Yet Cuoco was clear that a positive strategy for Italy could be gleaned from the experience of abortive revolution.

Between 1803 and 1806 he immersed himself in political journalism in Milan, coming into direct (almost daily) contact with his politically active contemporaries. He was the founder and first editor of the influential *Giornale Italiano* (1804-6). The political purpose of the journal was

⁹⁰ CUOCO, *Fragment 2*, p. 232.

⁹¹ CUOCO, *Fragment 2*, p. 232.

⁹² J. J. ROUSSEAU, *The Social Contract*, trans. M. Cranston, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth 1968, p. 72.

⁹³ CUOCO, *Fragment 2*, p. 236.

⁹⁴ CUOCO, *Fragment 2*, p. 238.

⁹⁵ CUOCO, *Fragment 2*, p. 240.

⁹⁶ M. OAKESHOTT, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, Methuen, London 1962; B. HADDOCK, *Michael Oakeshott: Rationalism in Politics*, in M. FORSYTH - M. KEENS-SOPER (eds.), *The Political Classics: Green to Dworkin*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1962, pp. 100-120.

⁹⁷ C. KUKATHAS, *Hayek and Modern Liberalism*, Clarendon, Oxford 1990 [1989], p. vii.

clear. Cuoco announced in the first edition that it was not simply “a matter of conserving public spirit but of creating it”⁹⁸. The point was to lift the minds of the Italians, to mould the inhabitants of provinces into citizens of a state. To this end he directed the journal to the principal achievements of Italians in the history of philosophy, literature and politics. There would be articles on different aspects of modern European thought and their significance for Italian culture, together with studies and reviews of current developments in the worlds of politics, economics, the arts and education – all designed to foster awareness of the central problems facing Italy.

In many of Cuoco’s specific articles the themes that had emerged in the *Historical Essay* would be generalized and used as a key to interpret recent events in Italian political history. His range of topics extends from detailed reference to individual writers (notably Machiavelli, Vico and Pestalozzi), through a general characterization of the Italian political tradition, to analyses of principal developments in Europe, notably the impact of the French Revolution and Napoleon⁹⁹. The tone is more didactic than the *Historical Essay*, but the message remains the same. If Italy were ever to revivify her political culture, it would be in terms of the resources of her own tradition.

Nor was Cuoco’s exploration of a distinctively Italian tradition restricted to journalism. In the same fertile period in which he was immersed in the *Giornale Italiano*, he produced a philosophical romance, *Platone in Italia* (1804-6), that sought, through a series of mythical dialogues, to unearth a specifically Italian contribution to the western philosophical tradition at its inception, championing an ancient Italian language that embodied a pristine wisdom later overwhelmed by the impact of Greek philosophy.¹⁰⁰ The argument is far-fetched for modern readers, but Cuoco had an exemplary source in Vico’s *De antiquissima Italorum sapientia* of 1710.¹⁰¹ The concept of an ancient, almost primordial, wisdom is, of course, treated with deep suspicion by modern historians, focused as they often are on the discursive construction of cultures in deeply divided contexts. What remains, however, once the stylized structure is factored out, is a sustained rebuttal of a rationalist cast of mind. Cuoco turns the association among his contemporaries of rationalism with enlightenment on its head, highlighting instead a tale of corruption, sophistry and special pleading. Not only is wisdom lost, but also the culture of virtue that sustained it.¹⁰²

Cuoco’s personal fortune changed abruptly in 1806 with the reassertion of French hegemony in Naples. From 1806 until the Bourbon restoration of 1815, Cuoco assumed a range of important administrative functions in his homeland, while also continuing with his journalistic work. Nominated as advisor to the Court of Appeal in 1806, he was in 1807 made president of a commission charged with the reorganization of the legal system in the Kingdom of Naples. In 1809 he was asked by Murat to draw up a plan for the modernization of the educational system. The project was to be his most important work of these years, not only as an illustration of his lifelong concern to strike a balance between continuity and change but as a statement which, through de Sanctis and Gentile, was to have a lasting influence on the theory and practice of education in Italy¹⁰³. Further important administrative responsibilities were to follow, culminating in his appointment as director general of the Treasury in 1812. His final eight years, from 1815,

⁹⁸ V. CUOCO, *Pagine Giornalistiche*, ed. F. Tessitore, Laterza, Bari 2011, p. 6.

⁹⁹ V. CUOCO, *Pagine Giornalistiche*, ed. F. Tessitore, Laterza, Bari 2011, pp. 35-47, 50-63, 180-182, 247-251.

¹⁰⁰ CUOCO, *Scritti vari*. Ed. N. Cortese and F. Nicolini. Laterza, Bari 1924; si veda anche R. DAINOTTO, “With Plato in Italy: The Value of Literary Fiction in Napoleonic Italy,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 73 (2011) pp. 399-418; A. DE FRANCESCO, *The Antiquity of the Italian Nation. The cultural Origins of a Political Myth in Modern Italy*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2013.

¹⁰¹ G. VICO, *Opere filosofiche*, ed. N. Badaloni. Sansoni, Florence 1971, pp. 55-131; B. HADDOCK, *Vico’s Political Thought*, Mortlake Press, Swansea 1986, pp. 58-64.

¹⁰² Si veda anche *Fragment 6*.

¹⁰³ V. CUOCO, *Scritti vari*, 2nd vol., N. Cortese and F. Nicolini (eds.), Laterza, Bari 1924, pp. 3-122.

were beset with mental illness that prevented him from leading any kind of active life. He died in 1823.

Cuoco's life and work spanned an extraordinary period of European political history that set terms of reference for the emerging ideologies that would dominate nineteenth-century political thought and practice. The tensions in his personal position look strained from a later perspective, but what we see in his work is a determined commitment to come to grips with social forces and developments that had yet to assume a settled form. Despite reservations about the wisdom of imitating French thought and practice, Cuoco was thus prepared to exploit the possibilities offered in Napoleonic Italy for reform and development. It was only French dominance that had enabled him to become a public figure in Milan and Naples. Yet he was aware that France had exploited Italian territories and distorted the "natural" evolution of Italian public life.

His *Historical Essay* remains Cuoco's crowning achievement, not least because it articulated tensions and cross-currents that standard revolutionary and reactionary theory simply could not accommodate. The complexity of the political world resists easy classification. Cuoco, however, offers a perspective that enables theory to build on everyday experience, concentrating on workable rather than ideal solutions. Viewed in this light, much of his journalism, a life-long commitment, can be read as detailed engagement with a rapidly changing world, very much the message of his early masterpiece. With the publication of *Historical Essay*, we offer English-speaking readers the opportunity to study Cuoco's ideas for themselves, in the context of a period in European history that still challenges us politically.