Is there an ‘Italian’ school of Spinoza studies?
Some present and future perspectives

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Abstract
This paper sketches a bottom-up reconstruction of the panorama of Italian Spinoza studies over the past three decades. It tries to capture the self-representation of the Italian scholarly community starting from the analysis of collective volumes, and then exploring the results of a survey among the members of the newly established Italian Societas Spinozana, complemented by individual interviews with leading Spinoza scholars. What emerges is a past heritage centered on historical and philological research, but also deeply interested in political themes and in bringing Spinoza into dialogue with contemporary issues. Today, Spinoza studies in Italy seem to be in a transitional phase, in which a solid bridge must be built between older and younger generations of scholars, negotiating how to handle the heritage of the former and orienting the new perspectives of the latter.

Keywords: historical reconstruction, philology, Marxist philosophy, theoretical Spinozism, Italian philosophy

1 Introduction

In 1997, Filippo Mignini was asked to comment on the state of Spinoza studies in Italy during the twentieth century and the contribution of Spinoza’s thought to Italian culture.¹ He commented that Italian Spinoza studies became a significative voice in the context of international research only from the 1960s onwards. Prior to that, Spinoza was surely read, studied, and refuted (of course) by Italian philosophers, but seemingly for more parochial reasons, and without producing interpretations or philological tools that could easily arouse the interest of the international public. Imagining

¹ This contribution is now published in this issue of JSS as Filippo Mignini, “Spinoza and Twentieth-century Italian Culture,” Journal of Spinoza Studies 3, no. 1 (2024): 78-93.

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potential avenues for the relatively ‘new’ Italian Spinoza scholarship, Mignini suggested that increased internationalization arguably undermined the possibility of considering Spinoza studies from a national perspective. He also surmised that two of the most intriguing points upon which Spinoza’s thought could have made a contribution to the development of twenty-first century culture would have been the interest for a ‘monistic model of human being’ and a ‘permanent dialogue between West and East’.²

What is the situation twenty-six years later, when globalization is in full-swing, the internet, social media and AI are changing our ways of reading and understanding reality, and English has imposed itself as the lingua franca for international academic research? Does it still make sense to take a ‘national’ perspective on Spinoza studies? And more specifically, can we find a distinctive ‘Italian reading’ of Spinoza today? If so, what would its potential and future perspectives?

In order to address these and related questions, I take here a bottom-up approach. Instead of imposing my own personal reconstruction of the shape and meaning of recent Italian scholarship on Spinoza, I’d like to give voice (as much as possible) to the way Italian Spinoza scholars present themselves. I proceed in three steps. I first use some collected volumes published in the past two decades in order to sketch a preliminary picture of the scholarly network of Spinoza studies in Italy. I then present the results of a survey I submitted through the channels of the Italian Societas Spinozana, which helped me gather further data in order to refine the picture of this scholarly network and its composition. Based on these results, I selected those scholars that seemed to be more central in the network and asked them personally to reply to a few questions about the nature and status of Italian Spinoza scholarship. I present the collective answers of these interviews before offering my own concluding remarks.

My purpose here is to combine both scholarly sources and quantitative data. If not totally exhaustive, this approach promises to at least provide a sufficiently representative and diversified overview of how Spinoza’s thought is approached and perceived both in Italian academia and in the broader public interested in it. Unlike Mignini in his 1997 contribution, I will not focus on general aspects of Italian culture in the last three decades or so, and how they might have influenced (or be influenced by) readings of Spinoza. This task would be both too daunting for the scope of this paper, and perhaps premature given the short timeframe. What I aim to capture is something that is simultaneously more narrow and more concrete. My goal is to reconstruct the network of people (including their geographical and institutional frameworks) that appear to be the most ‘central’ in the discussion of Spinoza’s thought, and study how their work can be both reflective of and steering for today’s Italian reception of Spinoza.

2 Collected volumes

To get a sense of the shape of the Italian network of Spinoza scholars at the turn of the twenty-first century, two collected volumes are particularly interesting. The first is titled Ricerche e Prospettive
and issued from a congress organized in 2002. It includes contributions from twenty-three Italian scholars who explore different readings of Spinoza’s philosophy in the Peninsula from Antiquity to the twentieth century (thirteen contributions in the volume are devoted to the latter period). This volume demonstrates the attention that has been paid to both the history of Spinoza’s reception in Italy and in reconstructing a broader genealogy of Spinoza studies in more recent times.

In 2012 an important conference held in Paris at the Sorbonne brought together ten leading Italian scholars, with the aim of reflecting on the specificity of Spinoza studies in Italy. A further aim was to compare Italian and French approaches to reading Spinoza. This focus turned Italian Spinoza studies into an explicit object of study unto itself by French colleagues, as echoed in the title of the volume issued from this conference, *Spinoza transalpin*.

The volume’s editors suggest three main lines of research that seem to emerge in Italian Spinoza studies: (1) philological works (critical editions, indexes) with a specific interest in Spinoza’s lexicon; (2) historical research on the sources, context and reception of Spinoza’s thought; (3) thematic questions focusing on the theory of knowledge (intuition, imagination) and political themes (democracy, multitude).

The ‘Italian way’ of approaching these issues seems to lie in a marked emphasis on the reconstruction of relations of influences, cultural mediations, and contextual reconstructions (what in the Anglophone world is associated with intellectual history, or history proper). Rational reconstructions (like those typified by Jonathan Bennet’s work) are quite absent from the Italian mind. Concerning politics and theory of knowledge, when these are not explored from a historical interest, they are most often approached from a (more or less explicit) contemporary and actualizing point of view, not infrequently inspired by Marxist overtones.

If we now look at the scholars involved in these two volumes, together with those mentioned in Mignini’s 1997 contribution, we find that nine scholars appear in more than one of these sources. They are: Franco Biasutti (Padua), Daniela Bostrenghi (Urbino), Paolo Cristofolini (Pisa), Filippo

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5 The relationships between French and Italian Spinoza readings (and scholars) have been quite close over the past decades and are both propelled by a shared socio-political interest for the renewal of both Marxism and historical research. This led to the emergence of a number of connections across the Alps between scholars based in the two countries, with a few Italians spending a significant part of their life in France, and several Italian and French universities creating agreements for fostering the exchange of PhD students and researchers and facilitating multiple academic activities from conferences to publications. To give a few examples, Antonio Negri (mentioned below) is perhaps one of the most influential Italian interpreters of Spinoza, but spent large part of his life in France; Saverio Ansaldi is another relevant Italian voice in the landscape of Spinoza studies who worked and published mostly in France; Pina Totaro is based in Rome but published her most recent work in French with a French publisher: Pina Totaro, *Quatre Enquêtes sur Spinoza* (Paris: Publications de l’École Pratique des Hautes Études, 2021). Nevertheless, the volume *Spinoza transalpin* is the first to explicitly focus on this scholarly network.
Mignini (Macerata), Vittorio Morfino (Milan), Omero Proietti (Macerata), Cristina Santinelli (Urbino), Pina Totaro (Rome), and Stefano Visentin (Urbino).  

This list suggests the presence of two main geographical hubs for Spinoza scholars: Urbino and Macerata. These are both peripheral small towns in central Italy. They are relatively close to one another (less than a two-hour drive) but also relatively far away from big cities and main philosophy hubs (like Rome or Milan). Urbino is strongly associated with the chair held by Emilia Giancotti-Boscherini (1930-1992), to whose memory the volume *Ricerche e Prospettive* was dedicated. Macerata emerged as a center for Spinoza studies mostly due to the presence of Filippo Mignini and his collaborators, especially Omero Proietti. Both centers have a strong historical orientation in the study of Spinoza, although Macerata has perhaps a greater emphasis on philological work—both Mignini and Proietti produced several critical editions and translations of Spinoza’s works—while Urbino has perhaps a greater emphasis on the moral and political dimensions and implications of Spinoza’s thought.

Based on these data, I would like to sketch a tentative working hypothesis about the nature of Spinoza scholarship in Italy at the turn of the twenty-first century. The relatively peripheral location of the main centers of aggregation for Spinoza scholarship might allow for a significant degree of freedom for experimentation, which results in a peculiar approach which I shall tentatively call ‘historicist reconstruction’. With this, I mean something in between the more commonly discussed ‘rational reconstruction’ and ‘contextualization’. While contextualism aims to reconstruct the thought of a historical author based on an approximation of how that thought could have been understood in the author’s own historical context, rational reconstruction tries to explore that same thought from a systematic point of view, often asking questions and seeking solutions that are relevant for the contemporary debate. I suggest that we use the label ‘historicist reconstruction’, instead, to signal a possible middle-path between these two approaches, which is characterized by an interest in

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8 Due to limits of space, I will not be able to provide here a full bibliography for each of these scholars. I will thus limit myself to mention one or just a few relevant publications that might be illustrative of the main lines of research pursued by each scholar mentioned. As some of these names will recur below, I now provide here only a few references to the main monographies published by those I will not be able to address further: Franco Biasutti, *La dottrina della scienza in Spinoza* (Bologna: Patron, 1979); Daniela Bostrenghi, *Forme e virtù dell’immaginazione in Spinoza* (Naples: Bibliopolis, 1996); Omero Proietti, *Philedonius. 1657. Spinoza, van den Enden, e i classici latini* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2010); Cristina Santinelli, *Mente e corpo. Studi su Cartesio e Spinoza* (Urbino: Quattroventi, 2000); Stefano Visentin, *La libertà necessaria. Teoria e pratica della democrazia in Spinoza* (Pisa: ETS, 2001).


11 See especially the works by Bostrenghi, *Forme e virtù dell’immaginazione; Giancotti-Boscherini, Studi su Hobbes e Spinoza; Visentin, La libertà necessaria.*

translating problems of the present into the context and terminology of the past (accurately understood) and use that translation to move today’s dialogue forward.

This approach is largely facilitated by Italian academia. While ‘theoretical philosophy’ and ‘history of philosophy’ formally count as two separate and independent fields, in actual practice Italian ‘theoretical philosophy’ has a long tradition of being heavily informed by a sustained discussion with historical figures. For instance, Italian ‘theoretical’ philosophers who would consider themselves under the umbrella of ‘continental philosophy’ often engage with German philosophical authorities, from Kant to Hegel, and Marx to Nietzsche and Heidegger, as exemplified by the works of contemporary Italian philosophers such as Emanuele Severino, Gianni Vattimo, and Donatella di Cesare. At the same time, most of the oldest interpreters of Spinoza who would have also considered themselves to be autonomous philosophers—for instance, Giovanni Gentile, Piero Martinetti, but also more recently Remo Bodei—combined the idea of careful historical exegesis with straightforward theoretical engagement.

I surmise that this ‘historicist reconstruction’ must be conceived more as a fluid effort than as a monolithic or rigid method. It is a gesture more than a well-defined object. And yet, it seems to capture the simultaneous interest in several Italian Spinoza scholars for a thorough engagement with Spinoza’s historical context and for creating a fruitful theoretical dialogue between his thought and today’s philosophical issues and debates. In the last half-century or so, this approach has emerged from scholarship with a political (and more specifically Marxist or post-Marxist) interest. However, historicist reconstruction does not have to be guided by political inspirations, and can in fact be applied to other domains or research areas. My hypothesis is that the relatively peripheral and decentralized geographical set-up of Spinoza scholarship has facilitated the development of this sort of explorative approach, which might have otherwise encountered stronger resistance in more unified, centralized, and standardized environments.

However, this is just a rough hypothesis based on a few publication records. In order to explore it further, I decided to distribute a survey within a larger group of people interested in Spinoza and active in the field. To do so, I turned to the newly established Italian Societas Spinozana. Starting out as an informal group in 2014, and then officially founded in 2017, this society has for several years promoted the discussion and dissemination of Spinoza’s thought both among academics and the general public. It thus seemed the natural interface to obtain a more concrete idea of how Spinoza is approached in Italian academia and culture.

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13 See, for instance, the seminal works by Antonio Negri, now in Spinoza (Rome: DeriveApprodi, 2006); Emilia Giancotti-Boscherini, “La nascita del materialismo moderno in Hobbes e Spinoza” in Studi su Hobbes e Spinoza; Vittorio Morfino, Incursioni Spinoziste (Milan: Mimesis, 2002).

14 See, for instance, the recent work by Antonino Pennisi, Che ne sarà dei corpi? Spinoza e i misteri della cognizione incarnata (Bologna: il Mulino, 2021). This monograph is devoted to use Spinoza’s own philosophy to address current issues in cognitive science. Or else, see Roberto Esposito, Vitam instituere. Genealogia dell’istituzione da Spinoza a noi (Turin: Einaudi, 2023), who focuses on the emergence of the notion of ‘institution’ within modern thought and sees in Spinoza a particularly crucial source for rethinking contemporary notions and political structures. This line is also developed in Pina Totaro and Giovanni Licata, eds., Letture di Spinoza per il nuovo millennio (Rome: Sapienza Università editrice, 2023).
3 Survey

The survey was distributed in Spring 2023 through the social media channels of the *Societas Spinozana*. Based on the preliminary results, the survey was also submitted to individual scholars who were mentioned often in the answers, and to the new international research center *Sive Natura* (based in Bologna, to be discussed later) and its affiliates.

I collected forty-six individual answers (although at the time of distributing the survey, the *Societas* counted thirty-nine formally registered members). A little more than a quarter of responses (26.1%) come from academics, and a little less than a quarter (21.7%) from non-academics. The rest are relatively evenly distributed between university students, PhD students, and teachers in secondary schools. More than half of the answers (54.3%) came from people who identified as having studied Spinoza for ten or more years, and another portion (19.6%) between five and ten years. Only one quarter of the answers (26.1%) came from people who studied Spinoza for five years or less. These initial figures illustrate the relevance of this sample, as it nicely blends the whole spectrum of Spinoza audience, from academics to the general public. And, while it mostly represents people with a long-term Spinoza interest, it also includes the voices of some newcomers.

When asked about their favorite of Spinoza’s works, the majority of answers (63%) pointed to the *Ethics*, followed by the *Theological-Political Treatise* (19.6%) and the *Political Treatise* (8.7%). The fact that the *Ethics* is Spinoza’s most popular work is perhaps not surprising in itself, although given the emphasis on the politically-oriented research in Italian Spinoza scholarship, one might have expected the political works to be more popular.

I then asked interviewees to more precisely select out of eighteen options what their main topics of interest in the domain of Spinoza studies were. A single interviewee could select multiple options. The average preferences per topic were ten, but the topics that got significantly above-average representation were ‘moral philosophy and ethics’ (58%), ‘politics and social philosophy’ (46%), ‘metaphysics and ontology’ (46%), followed by ‘psychology and theory of the affects’ (34%) and ‘Spinoza and other modern Western thinkers’ (37%).

These results show that there is a hardcore interest in political and historical topics, but that this is also complemented and integrated by other interests that range from metaphysics to psychology, keeping in the background a more specific historical interest in the context and reception of Spinoza’s thought. Apparently, the Italian landscape is animated by a relatively greater diversity of interests than it might have appeared at first sight.

However, when asked about what the salient features of Italian Spinoza scholarship in the last forty-years were, interviewees seemed to confirm the picture emerging above from the volume *Spinoza transalpin*. Out of ten options, those which received the most votes were: ‘bringing Spinoza into the political discourse’ (54.3%), ‘critical editions’ (47.8%), ‘historical contextualization’ (43.5%), ‘reception of Spinoza’s thought in Western philosophy’ (37%), and ‘theoretical developments of Spinozist thought’ (28.3%). In this sense, the survey seems to confirm that the internally perceived identity of Italian Spinoza scholarship centers around the axes of history, philology, and politics, although interpreted with a non-negligible interest in theoretical speculations.

The next step in the survey asked for the names of five Italian scholars active within the last forty years and whose work the interviewees deemed particularly important for the field. The answers mentioned forty distinct names, with an average of 4.5 mentions for each, although twenty-four of
them are mentioned only once or twice. However, thirteen scholars are mentioned more than average: Remo Bodei\(^\text{15}\) (based in Pisa, 1938-2019), Paolo Cristofolini\(^\text{16}\) (based in Pisa, 1937-2020), Emilia Giancotti-Boscherini, Filippo Mignini (based in Macerata, now retired), Vittorio Morfino, Antonio Negri (based in France, 1933-2023), Omero Proietti (based in Macerata, 1955-2023), Andrea Sangiacomo\(^\text{17}\) (based in the Netherlands), Emanuela Scribano (based in Siena then Venice, now retired), Carlo Sini\(^\text{18}\) (based in Milan, now retired), Pina Totaro (based in Rome, La Sapienza), Francesco Toto (based in Rome, Roma Tre), Lorenzo Vinciguerra (based in France, now in Bologna). Most of these names recur more than ten times (Cristofolini, Giancotti, Morfino, Negri, Scribano, Sini, Vinciguerra), with Mignini mentioned 23 times. It is interesting to observe that this list has less than 50% overlap with the one derived from the two collected volumes I presented in section 2. It is also noticeable that Remo Bodei and Carlo Sini would not at first be identified as ‘Spinoza scholars’ in the strictest sense of the term, as their contributions typically encompass a broader philosophical and theoretical scope. The same goes for Antonio Negri, whose work on Spinoza’s political thought had an enormous impact on Spinoza scholarship (both in Italy and globally), but whose research interests could be considered broader. This relates to the fluid borders between Italian theoretical philosophy and history of philosophy as mentioned in section 2.

To get a sense of how these names are connected, I generated a network visualization (figure 1) in which a scholar is connected with another one if their names are mentioned together by the same interviewee.\(^\text{19}\)

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\(^\text{18}\) Among his contributions, see Carlo Sini, *Archivio Spinoza. La verità e la vita* (Milan: Mimesis, 2005).

\(^\text{19}\) Technically speaking, what I produced is a ‘projected network’, in which an initial two-mode network (in this case, a network composed by interviewees mentioning scholars) is translated into a one-mode network (in this case, all scholars are connected together if mentioned by the same interviewee). See for further details Matthieu Latapy et al, “Basic Notions for the Analysis of Large Two-mode Networks”, *Social Networks* 30, no. 1 (2008): 31–48. Thanks to Silvia Donker for the technical assistance in producing the visualizations.
Figure 1—The projected network of Spinoza scholars

Figure 1 shows a few interesting things. Overall, this is a ‘connected’ network, which means that there are no isolated groups, although some groups seem more remote than others and the overall network shows a clear centre. As a representation of the interviewees’ answers, this means that in their view, most of these scholars are associable with one another and are seen as having shaped Italian Spinoza scholarship collectively over the past decades. This association, though, cannot be explained by ideology, geography, or age. This becomes apparent, for instance, if we zoom in to the core of the network (figure 2).

Figure 2—The core of the network of Spinoza scholars

While Cristofolini, Negri and Giancotti might be associated by a common ideological interest in Marxist readings of Spinoza, this hardly applies to most of the other names in the network. The core
of the network also shows association between different generations of scholars, including both individuals who have already passed away (Giancotti, Cristofolini, Bodei, Proietti), scholars who have retired (Scribano, Sini, Mignini), senior scholars (Totaro, Vinciguerra, Morfino), and younger scholars (Toto, Sangiacomo). This transversality is probably connected with the phrasing of the survey question, which asked respondents to pick names relevant to the last forty years, but still shows that age is not necessarily a salient reason for the aggregation.

I surmise that this picture can be interpreted as showing the permeability of academic field-boundaries within Italian Spinoza studies. While not all the names included here focus on the same topics, or approach Spinoza in the same way, most of these names happened to be academically connected to one another. We may assume that this created a form of community not based necessarily on the sharing of substantive commitments or topics of research, but on the need to confront alternative readings and develop one’s own perspective in dialogue with others. In this sense, the picture shows again (albeit from a different angle) the multifarious, pliable and flexible nature of Italian Spinoza scholarship and the centrifugal forces that shape its agenda(s).

Moreover, it is worth remembering that the links connecting these names represent the fact that the same interviewee would associate them when asked about prominent Spinoza scholars. This means that the core of the network represents how Spinoza scholars are associated in the perception of the interested public. The information we can extract from this representation is that the public is exposed to a very diverse landscape of Spinoza readings, and yet takes them all to be contributing to a better understanding of and engagement with Spinoza’s thought. This can thus be another way of emphasising the positive value of plurality and diversity in the Italian reception of Spinoza.

To conclude the survey, I also asked respondents to name scholars that had played an important role in the interviewee’s own intellectual formation and studies. This was clearly a question more open to idiosyncratic preferences, but it yielded another nineteen names of scholars that were not included in the previous answer. However, most of them were mentioned only once, with a low average of three times. Nevertheless, this suggests that a much wider range of scholars than those appearing in the previous list have contributed to create interest around the study of Spinoza. In this sense, ‘non-Spinozists’ in Italian academia have a significant role, even if less apparent, in shaping the interests in Spinoza and the discussion around his thought. This might also explain why Italian scholarship strives to approach Spinoza in a way that can make his thought relevant for addressing contemporary issues, as mentioned above. As the entry point into Spinoza studies might be found in the interests of people who would not identify as Spinoza scholars themselves, it makes sense to keep Spinoza research oriented in such a way that its results can feed back into this broader philosophical audience.

To conclude, I asked the interviewees to name ‘places’ that could be seen as hosting major hubs for Spinoza scholarship in Italy. The answers identified nine places in total (with an average of 4.7 times for each location). Slightly below average is Urbino (mentioned four times), and above average are Macerata (mentioned five times), Milan (mentioned five times), Rome La Sapienza (mentioned seven times). Significantly above average, however, are Bologna (mentioned nine times) and the opposite answer, ‘I don’t know/it’s not relevant’ (mentioned nine times). Compared with the picture I had sketched in section 2, it is clear that today there seems to be a greater geographical diversity in Spinoza scholarship around Italy, which identifies as aggregation points major cities and university centres (Milan, Bologna, Rome). However, the ‘peripheral’ nature of Spinoza
scholarship is supported from another point of view, as there is no univocal centralization emerging from these answers, and indeed there is an equal scepticism about identifying any clear location as the ‘headquarters’ of Italian Spinoza scholarship. As a revision to the working hypothesis I introduced above, it could be suggested that the decisive element in facilitating the ‘historicist approach’ to Spinoza is not necessarily the geographically peripheral nature of the main hubs of aggregations for scholars, but, more fundamentally, the absence of any distinct hub or form of centralization in general.

In order to further explore the self-representation of Italian Spinoza scholarship, I reached out to scholars who are still alive and who were mentioned most often in the survey. Six of them—Mignini, Morfino, Scribano20, Totaro21, Toto22, Vinciguerra23—agreed to answer a few questions about how they see the present and future state of Spinoza scholarship in Italy.24

4 Interviews

The first question I asked in the interview was: ‘What is your own main contribution to Spinoza scholarship over the past few years?’ Most interviewees mentioned in their replies their contributions to reconstructing the historical sources and context of Spinoza’s thought (Mignini, Morfino, Totaro, Toto, Scribano). Some mentioned their critical editions and philological work (Mignini, Totaro). In several cases, the theoretical impact of historical discussions was also emphasised. In terms of themes, these were fairly varied and corresponded to most parts of Spinoza’s Ethics: network causality (Morfino, E1-2), imagination (Vinciguerra, E2), the body and the idea of recognition (Toto, E2-4, and TTP), moral philosophy, passions, and teleology (Scribano, E3-4), religion and theology (Totaro, E2-4, and TTP). In this respect, most of the discussion seems to concentrate on the themes dealt with in the central sections of the Ethics, with a relatively lighter engagement with those of part one,

20 Emanuela Scribano’s works are keen on the reconstruction of the early modern context in which Spinoza’s thought flourished. See for instance, Emanuela Scribano, Macchine con la mente. Fisiologia e metafisica tra Cartesio e Spinoza (Rome: Carocci, 2015).
21 Pina Totaro has worked extensively on the reconstruction of Spinoza’s philosophical and theological lexicon, see for instance, Instrumenta mentis. Contributi al lessico filosofico di Spinoza (Florence: L.S. Olschki, 2009). Together with Leen Spruit, she has also discovered the ‘Vatican Manuscript’ of Spinoza’s Ethics, see Leen Spruit and Pina Totaro, The Vatican Manuscript of Spinoza’s Ethics (Leiden: Brill, 2011). She also produced an Italian translation of the TTP based on the new critical edition provided by Fokke Akkerman (published in the Puf edition of Spinoza’s complete works): Baruch Spinoza, Tractatus Theologico-Politicus / Trattato Teologico-Politico, Pina Totaro ed. (Naples: Bibliopolis, 2007). Ideally, this volume should have been part of a series of new Italian translations, supported by ample commentaries and based on the new critical edition of Spinoza’s works. The series in this format has not been completed so far.
22 Francesco Toto devoted a number of studies to Spinoza and other early modern figures, often studying them from the point of view of their views in moral and political philosophy. See for instance, L’Individualità dei corpi. Percorsi nell’Etica di Spinoza (Milan: Mimesis, 2015).
23 Lorenzo Vinciguerra focused a significant part of his Spinoza research on the theme of imagination and its implications for aesthetics and semiology, see for instance, La semiotica di Spinoza (Pisa: ETS, 2012).
24 For the purposes of this paper, I prefer to take myself out of this picture, insofar as this is possible. While reconstructing the answers I received, I will not comment on the contents from my own perspective in order not to affect twice the picture that emerges from them (as I am already involved with summarizing and presenting the data).
and even less with part five. Overall, however, these answers are in line with the general trends that already emerged from the other sources discussed above.

Then I asked: ‘How do you see the current state of Spinoza studies in Italy?’ Answers were split. Some stressed the vitality of Spinoza scholarship in Italy (Scribano, Morfino, Toto), expressed by the interest of academics, young scholars, and the general public, also with an emphasis on political themes (Totaro). Some suggested an ongoing generational crisis (Mignini, Scribano, Vinciguerra) due to the need to integrate the results of previous generations of scholars with attempts to find new directions for Spinoza research. Others also pointed out potential difficulties within the Italian academic system that might create obstacles for this development. Such difficulties included the hierarchical issues within Italian academic culture (Toto, Morfino), the heritage of a certain Marxist orientation in the studies that is becoming more problematic today (Toto, Totaro), and the fact that some of the main ‘Spinozists’ do not focus on Spinoza only, which would arguably make it more challenging to concentrate resources and attention on Spinoza studies per se.

When asked about ‘Where would you direct young people interested in studying Spinoza? Is there a major centre in Italy?’, as a general remark several interviewees (especially Morfino, Toto, Vinciguerra) mentioned the non-centralized nature of Italian academic research (which is a point that already emerged above). However, most of them also signalled the University of Bologna and its new international centre for Spinoza studies, *Sive natura*, as the most promising new hub. *Sive natura* was founded in 2021 by Lorenzo Vinciguerra and Filippo del Lucchesi when they both agreed to move to Bologna, after having spent a significant part of their career abroad (in France and the United Kingdom respectively).

Looking for concrete suggestions, I asked: ‘What perspectives do you envisage for Spinoza studies in Italy?’ Some answers (Totaro, Toto, Vinciguerra) followed in the line of the ‘Italian tradition’ sketched above: cultivate the Italian expertise in producing critical editions and studies of texts and sources, possibly broadening it to a comparativist dimension (Vinciguerra). Some (Scribano, Totaro) further suggested exploring specific historical contexts, like the early modern Dutch milieu and religious debates (Scribano) or possible relations between Spinoza and Italian Renaissance thinkers (Totaro). Others (Toto, Vinciguerra, Mignini) also suggested that there are opportunities to develop new lines of research in connection with other fields and sciences (Vinciguerra) or to focus on metaphysical topics like the ‘undetermined’—possibly via cross-cultural studies involving Eastern philosophies like Confucianism and Buddhism (Mignini). The need for coordination among scholars and across disciplines was also emphasized (Toto).

As a penultimate question, I asked: ‘Do you think it will still be possible to talk about an ‘Italian’ school of Spinoza studies in the future?’ Here, answers were divided again. Some seemed positive (Totaro, Vinciguerra), others a bit more tentative (Scribano, Mignini), stressing the need for deflating the political aspects of Spinoza research (Scribano) and preserving the synergy between historical and theoretical research (Mignini). Some were more sceptical, either because Italy is polycentric and the idea of a ‘school’ depended on an academic patronage-structure that is now significantly eroded (Toto), or because the very idea of an ‘Italian school’ might perhaps be seen more as a French projection, while Italy per se has always hosted multiple approaches that did not necessarily form a coherent whole (Morfino).

To conclude the interview, I asked a more personal question: ‘As a philosopher, would you describe yourself as a Spinozist?’ Here, half (Mignini, Morfino, Totaro) answered affirmatively with
some conviction; some were positive but with a cautious qualification (Scribano, Toto), stressing that they would consider themselves ‘Spinozist’ in the sense that Spinoza’s philosophy seems adequate and convincing as a philosophical view. One (Vinciguerra) stressed that all -isms and dogmas are suspicious, and philosophy is not about obeying an authority, an answer that sounds quite Spinozist in spirit to me.

To summarize, these short interviews seem to confirm some of the elements that emerged in the discussion above: Spinoza studies in Italy are diverse and are not strongly centralized from a geographical or academic point of view. However, there are new centres of aggregation emerging, such as Bologna, which, compared to the past, foster more activities in large cities and university hubs. It would be interesting to observe in the coming years whether the development of Spinoza studies in larger cities and universities will have an impact on their content, orientation and originality. In terms of topics and areas of study, the interviews confirm the long-term tradition of focusing on historical and philological research, combined with a focus on theoretical and political issues. However, answers also stressed how in recent years we have witnessed a transition into a new phase, in which new voices are emerging and the fate of Spinoza studies in the Peninsula is relatively open and uncertain. An important point that is stressed in several interviews was the need for creating some sort of continuity between older and younger generations of Spinoza scholars, so that the heritage of the past can be fruitfully capitalized to foster today’s and tomorrow’s innovations. But how exactly to do this remains an open question.

5 Concluding remarks

Like the Italian landscape, the landscape of Spinoza studies in Italy is decidedly polyphonic, polycentric and diverse. This multifariousness does not undermine the presence of a unified identity, but perhaps constitutes its most distinctive character. Italian Spinoza studies are currently in flux, emerging from several decades in which certain axes of research were consolidated, and opening up to new but still foggy horizons. Remarkably the geographical label ‘Italian’ is itself relatively fuzzy, as several of the names mentioned in the previous discussion are Italian by nationality but have spent extensive periods (or are even based) abroad or have returned to Italian universities after having built their reputation elsewhere. This suggests that the national boundaries of Italy are rather permeable and the composition of the pool of main actors in the cultural Italian sphere is increasingly open and shaped by international exchanges.

One feature that stands out from the discussion above is the effort of preserving the interconnection between historical and theoretical research (what I called ‘historicist reconstruction’). This is not necessarily achieved by translating Spinoza’s concepts into today’s philosophical jargon, but rather by trying to reinsert Spinoza’s own ideas (to be understood also through an informed historical and philological study of his works) into current debates. This has been practiced often in the domain of politics, but there seems to be a general consensus that Spinoza may contribute much more to our contemporary culture. This attitude is friendly to the idea of taking Spinoza seriously as a genuine interlocutor, and not just as an object of antiquarian study. In Italy, so it seems, Spinoza is not yet a relic of the remote past to be admired in a museum, but a living presence to be met in corridors, lecture rooms, libraries, cafés, and other public spaces. The audience interested in Spinoza and sparking interest for his philosophy in new readers is vast and cannot be confined to a small
pool of ‘specialists’. This creates the potential for a fertile feedback loop between themes and discussions in the general cultural landscape and the need for more studies by experts on detailed aspects of Spinoza’s thought. We can only wonder whether it is precisely this diffuse presence of Spinoza in the various areas of Italian cultural life that could provide the most vital suggestions for the coming decades of Italian Spinoz(ist) studies. Moreover, if we take this attitude based on a ‘historicist reconstruction’ and the desire for using Spinoza to address contemporary challenges as jointly distinctive of the ‘Italian’ reading of Spinoza, then we can imagine that Italian Spinoza studies might still play an important role in the global discussion, even when disseminated outside of the geographical borders of Italy and transmitted in other languages.

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