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Marco Sgarbi

The Democratization of Knowledge in Renaissance Italy

The Philosopher and the People

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in Renaissance Italy

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Marco Sgarbi

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1. Introduction

Abstract
The introduction identifies to what extent it is possible to speak of a democratization of knowledge in Renaissance Italy. It establishes the boundaries of the present investigation within the Aristotelian tradition, and outlines democratization as a *process* capable of assigning power to people. It anticipates how the democratization of knowledge historically is invested equally in ideas from religion and philosophy, involving the same democratizers, moved by similar intentions, employing identical techniques of vulgarization and targeting equivalent communities of recipients.

Keywords: Democratization, Knowledge, Process, Philosophy

In a seminal contribution to the definition of the "history of knowledge," the illustrious English historian Peter Burke writes that the second half the twentieth century was "the great age of the democratization of knowledges, thanks in part to radio lectures, televised science, open universities and online encyclopaedias."[1] Nothing on a similar level occurred, obviously, in the Renaissance. Nothing of the same magnitude or significance. However, something certainly occurred in the Renaissance, something that seems to point to a process of democratization of knowledge. New instruments and means of gathering, producing and disseminating knowledge – the printing press is but one example – emerged. New languages – vernacular ones – established themselves as languages of knowledge. New approaches to spirituality and religion were born with the Reformation and the spread of heterodox groups in Europe. Not irrelevant issues at the time, but central topics that historians have characterized – albeit in their very different interpretations – as foundational elements of the Renaissance.[2] Yet, it is

1 Peter Burke, *What is the History of Knowledge?* (London: Wiley, 2015), 96.

2 Some scholars have seen in the printing press a silent revolution that gave a fundamental impulse to characterizing movements of the Renaissance such as the Reformation and the Scientific Revolution (See Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*

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still legitimate to ask to what extent we are facing here a genuine process of democratization of knowledge.

Many are the critical voices that have been raised against a too simplistic and indiscriminate acceptance of the idea of democratization of knowledge. In relation to idioms, for instance, as Burke himself asserts, "to write in a vernacular language was to widen access to many knowledges in one way, by making them available to social groups that had not learned Latin … however, writing in a vernacular narrowed access in another way, access for foreigners."[3] This is for instance the famous case of Galileo Galilei and his two major masterpieces mainly written in the vernacular, namely the *Dialogo sopra i due massimi sistemi del mondo* and the *Discorsi e dimostrazioni matematiche intorno a due nuove scienze*, and only later translated in Latin.[4] Concerning the printing press, then, one might question how in a period of generalized illiteracy this could have been a real and meaningful agent of change. And even where there was the capability of reading, one might posit functional illiteracy in understanding texts of varied and differing complexities. It may also be questioned as to whether the printing press actually increased the circulation of knowledge in comparison to the era of manuscripts, which survived for more than a century as the instrument of scholarly communication.[5] So why are we dealing with democratization? Is it legitimate to talk of democratization? Is this perhaps an anachronistic historical label invented by scholars, or has it some historical foundation in the period under consideration?

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979). Others considered as a peculiar element of the Renaissance the emergence of vernacular literatures, for the reason that the use that people make of a language for intellectual purposes represents not the whim of an individual, but the expression of a collective force that spontaneously generates its own culture, tradition and knowledge. Among the many studies on the relationship between Renaissance and vernacular languages, see Vittorio Rossi, *Il Quattrocento* (Milano: Vallardi, 1956); Eugenio Garin, *La cultura del Rinascimento. Profilo storico* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1967). Finally, many historians have identified in the religious *renovatio* beginning with St Francis and Petrarch, and continuing up to the time of Erasmus and Luther, the true meaning of Renaissance, as rebirth, renewal, and new life, in which the individual is the main protagonist, unhinging religious authority from its role in mediating with God. Pertinent is the legacy of books like Henry Thode, *Franz von Assisi und die Anfänge der Kunst der Renaissance in Italien* (Berlin: Grote, 1885); Konrad Burdach, *Reformation, Renaissance, Humanismus. Zwei Abhandlungen über die Grundlage moderner Bildung und Sprachkunst* (Berlin: Paetel, 1918).

3 Burke, *What is the History of Knowledge?*, 96.

4 See Marco Bianchi, *Galileo in Europa. La scelta del volgare e la traduzione latina del* Dialogo sopra i due massimi sistemi (Venice: Edizioni Ca' Foscari, 2020).

5 Brian Richardson, "Print or Pen? Modes of Written Publication in Sixteenth-Century Italy," *Italian Studies*, 59 (2004): 39–64.

Before facing these problems directly, allow me perhaps a trivial remark, which is nonetheless important. Democratization characterizes a *process* that derives its name from democracy, which means power to the people or power to the many. It is best described according to four elements:

(1) Democratization is first of all a *process* and, as such, it is something in progress and not completed, but rather a *tendency* towards the accomplishment of something. Dealing with the democratization of knowledge, therefore, means working with an *attempt* at the expansion and spreading of knowledge to a wider number of people across multiple strata of society, an attempt that can be – to a greater or lesser degree – frustrated, achieved, or effective. This attempt should be assessed as such, that is as a process and according to its intentions, and not as a *fait accompli*. All too frequently, as I shall show in the pages of this essay, did vulgarizers themselves apologize – *captatio benevolentiae* – for the clumsiness of their attempt, for the language they employed, for their lack of adequate terminology, for the excesses in their imitation of and servility to Latin. Transposing a conceptuality related to a language is not an easy operation, for it is not easy to transpose different kinds of texts from one tradition into another idiom, in particular for authors who, as we shall see, were bilingual but mostly reasoned philosophically and scientifically in Latin.[6]

(2) The purpose of the process and attempt at democratization is to assign a power, a power which otherwise would not be available to people. This is the second fundamental aspect of democratization. Various kinds of knowledge manifest or detract from different types of power simultaneously. Indeed, unveiling religious mysteries diminished the authority of ecclesiastical institutions which had hitherto had control over society, tended to promote a private and immediate relationship with religion and spirituality. Equally, opening up philosophy and science broke the boundaries between high and low culture and fostered a more personal engagement and commitment to the advancement of knowledge. The process of democratization is not univocal even if it tends to produce, as we will see, common strategies.

(3) The third aspect concerns the recipients of the democratization of knowledge. To whom was this knowledge and power made available? The most obvious answer, which is not so very evident as I shall show, is that it

6 Umberto Eco, *Experiences in Translation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 17.

was to the "many," or to the "people." The concept of "many" presupposes its correlative and antonym the "few," and therefore, if applied to the concept of democratization, it implies the dissemination of knowledge to those beyond a narrow circle of intellectuals. Who are these people? And who is it that occupies the narrow circle? The boundaries are blurred. Here we come to the third aspect of this democratization. Without giving a very specific answer just yet, if we stick with the concept of democratization, we may say in broad terms that the first category is the common people. By the term "people" (Italian: *volgo*) I mean – coming at it from an intellectual and cultural standpoint – that cross-section of society that represents the majority and commanding the greatest anonymity, but also occupying the lowest levels of culture, and hence also containing the least qualified and influential in respect of economic and political life. It may be a synonym for the Italian word *popolo*, in being the part of society that is juxtaposed to the upper classes. The word "people" has a long and rich tradition, especially in medieval Italy, yet the historical and literary basis for the meaning adopted in this book can be found in many sixteenth-century authors, especially those orbiting the regions I consider in this book. Marin Sanudo writes that there are "three kinds of inhabitants: (1) nobles – who govern the state and the Republic … (2) citizens, (3) artisans, or the common people."[7] He was referring to the city of Venice, but by "people" he meant "artisans, workers, servants, marginal people, and numerous foreigners, who did not belong to the two higher categories."[8] According to Gasparo Contarini, by contrast, in Venice "the totality of the people is divided in two, so that some are of an honorable kind, and others are the lowest plebs."[9] Again, Donato Giannotti writes that by people (*popolari*) he meant plebeians (*plebei*) – that is, "those who practice the lowest arts to live, and have no status in the city."[10] The people is the great multitude (*moltitudine*) composed of different kinds of inhabitants, including low-level artisans or servants. Finally, in what may be considered the most important programmatic work of vernacular

7 Marin Sanudo, *De origine, situ et magistratibus urbis Venetae* (Milano: Centro di studi medioevali e rinascimentali E.A. Cicogna, 1980), 22.

8 Claire Judde de Larivière and Rosa M. Salzberg, "The People are the City: The Idea of the Popolo and the Condition of the Popolani in Renaissance Venice," *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 68 (2013): 769. The authors offer a seminal reconstruction of what the idea of "people" meant from economic, social, political and legal standpoints, drawing fine distinctions between the terms *popolo*, *popolani* and *popolari*.

9 Gasparo Contarini, *La Republica e i magistrati di Vinegia* (Venice: Giglio, 1564), 148.

10 Donato Giannotti, *Opere politiche* (Milano: Marzorati, 1974), vol. 1, 46.

humanism in the sixteenth century, Pietro Bembo's *Prose della volgar lingua* (1525), "people" is synonymous with the "masses" (*volgo*), "commoners" (*popolani*), "populace" (*genti*), "multitude" (*moltitudine*), "uneducated" (*non dotti*), and also "peasants" (*contadini*). Unlike many vulgarizers that we will encounter in this book, however, Pietro Bembo uses the term "people" in a derogatory sense, and advances a restricted conception of culture in which "very few men in each century" have knowledge.[11] I call this conception the aristocratic idea of knowledge. Nonetheless, "people" was also a general term used to designate low social classes or indistinct masses: "men and women, young and old, rich and poor, master artisans with their own workshops, merchants, shopkeepers and street sellers, laborers, apprentices and journeymen, shipbuilders and sailors, porters, fishermen, artists and performers, school teachers, prostitutes, domestic servants and gondoliers, barbers and doctors, policemen and town criers, beggars and vagabonds."[12] As Claire Judde de Larivière and Rosa M. Salzberg have written, the "people" was "not simply the poor or the marginal,"[13] but sometimes embraced king and prince, noblewomen, statesmen and intellectuals.[14]

(4) This very same word "people" should characterize or should be contained in the last important element of the democratization of knowledge – that is, the particular aspect from which the process derives its name, namely the idea of democracy itself. In order to assess whether there was a

11 See Pietro Bembo, *Prose della volgar lingua*, ed. Carlo Dionisotti (Torino: UTET, 1931), 31–2. See Antonio Montefusco, "Scrittori, Popolo, Italian Thought," in *Italia senza nazione. Lingue, culture conflitti tra Medioevo ed età contemporanea* (Perugia: Quodlibet, 2019), 73–98.

12 Judde de Larivière and Salzberg, "The People are the City," 773–4.

13 Ibid., 774.

14 According to Andrea Zorzi, the "people" included "groups at the bottom, or on the margins, such as unskilled workers, hired labourers, peasants, or the poor," and not only the "self-employed artisans organized in occupational guilds, skilled workers, masters and foremen, small traders and entrepreneurs, small property owners, notaries, teachers, and doctors," all of whom established themselves in opposition to the "nobles" and "knightly aristocracy." Andrea Zorzi, "The Popolo," in *Italy in the Age of the Renaissance 1300–1550* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 145. According to Roger Chartier, the term relates to "readers who did not belong to 'the three robes' …: the black robe of the clerics; the short robe of the nobility; and the long robe of a varied group of low- or high-grade officials, lawyers, and attorneys, to which must be added the medical profession. Thus I identify the following as belonging to the 'popular' class: peasants, master craftsmen and their journeymen, and merchants, including those who have retired from business and style themselves 'bourgeois'." See Roger Chartier, "Culture as Appropriation: Popular Cultural Uses in Early Modern France," in *Understanding Popular Culture: Europe from the Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Century* (Berlin-New York-Amsterdam: Mouton, 1984), 237–8.

process of democratization at that time – a process that in this sense is not only a mere historiographical hypothesis or label at best – it is necessary to understand what the concept of democracy at that time entailed, and also the contemporary evaluation of it. If we look at historical dictionaries of the Italian language, it is clear that both the noun "democracy" and the adjective "democratic" were related to the concept of "people" or the popular character of something – typically a form of government or administration.[15] The word "democracy" in itself did not enjoy the same positive connotation of today, but rather most of the time it was related to a taking of power by the people that led to turmoil and political instability because of their incapacity to govern and rule. What was democratic or popular was not positive, at least for the elite that at that time defined and characterized the concept. The term democracy coincided with a negative image that came essentially from the Greek classical tradition, and from a culture that was an expression of an aristocratic hegemony. A democratization of knowledge – if there was such a thing, therefore – had to do intellectual battle with this negative judgement. Indeed, as we shall see, religious and political authorities were afraid of, and had many concerns about, the democratization of knowledge, and they reacted with an attempt to close off access to knowledge, especially in Counter-Reformation Italy, legitimatizing their interventions on a religious basis. For this reason also, the focus on Italy is extremely important.

In this essay I want to provide some food for thought for understanding this process and to problematize it better, leaving to other scholars, undoubtedly much more qualified than me, to solve the problems that have worried generations of historians. In particular, this volume is about the process of democratization of knowledge that links the "Philosopher" par excellence – Aristotle from Stagira – and the people in Renaissance Italy. Whoever approaches the reading of these pages hoping to find a history of the magnificent triumph of the democratization of knowledge will be disappointed. This essay concerns rather the limits of democratization and its attempt to overcome them. I will focus on the Italian case because it falls more within my competence and expertise, even if I am perfectly aware that in other religious, cultural, social and geographical conditions the situation could be somewhat different.[16]

15 GDLI, vol. 4, 168–9.

16 See the illuminating reflections of Luca Bianchi in Luca Bianchi, "La 'specificità italiana': note sulla filosofia in Italia fra Medioevo e Rinascimento," *Rivista di filosofia*, 111 (2020): 3–31.

I will dwell particularly on two aspects of what a process of democratization should entail. First of all, I will look at the process of democratization of knowledge from the standpoint of language. My conviction is that in this period this process always implies a linguistic practice – that is, the transposition of texts from the Classical languages into the vernaculars, which expands the category of recipients to include those ignorant of Greek or Latin. The expansion is not only in terms of quantity, therefore, but first and foremost of quality. Indeed, writing in Latin could have guaranteed a wider dissemination of knowledge in terms of numbers across the various countries. Democratization, however, concerns also the opening up of access to knowledge for people with different levels of linguistic register and cultural background. In other words, the democratization of knowledge entails various forms of vulgarization. It is therefore a movement which is at one and the same time a process of extension and fragmentation with regard to knowledge. This is not, however, the only way of investigating democratization. Indeed, there are many ways of making knowledge more accessible, approaches and practices which can be applied even within the same language. A typical example is the reconfiguration of complex texts that employs technical and difficult terminology in easier and simpler works, omitting the most complex parts and using paratextual systems such as tables or diagrams to make the content more understandable. However, in the period I am considering, the debate concerning democratization of knowledge revolves around, or is at least strictly related to, linguistic problems.

Second, I have considered a specific case of knowledge – that of philosophy and, in particular, Aristotelian philosophy – because it has constituted for centuries the intellectual heritage of the cultural hegemonic class. Furthermore, Aristotelian philosophy, in its many and multiple versions, covers all branches of knowledge at the time. Understanding how and why such a wealth of knowledge was vulgarized helps to characterize and contextualize the putative process of democratization. My approach therefore will be limited and circumscribed, and will offer only a partial vision of the process of democratization of knowledge, without being so bold as to generalize further.

This essay has been written in order to address some specific questions:

– What was the framework of this process of democratization?
– Who democratizes?
– With what intentions?
– With what strategies, and in what manner?

– For whom was democratizing undertaken?
– What were the consequences?[17]

Chapter 1 reconstructs the context and theoretical framework within which a democratization of knowledge in Renaissance Italy emerged. It highlights the fundamental role played by Erasmus of Rotterdam in the development of an idea of democratic access to knowledge, in particular to gospel philosophy and Holy Scripture. The fundamental move that Erasmus made was to consider Holy Scripture and sacred books just like any other kind of lay knowledge or pagan philosophy – that is, as constituted by a set of ideas, concepts, and doctrines, by no means different from that of Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Lorenzo Valla or Marsilius Ficinus. No doubt gospel philosophy had divine origin, and for this reason it was the most praiseworthy and the most truthful. It was also the most powerful and the most difficult to understand and interpret because it was full of mysteries. But like any other form of knowledge, it could be gathered, analysed, disseminated and employed, especially for the purpose of the education of a human being. In so doing, in promoting the access to gospel philosophy and sacred knowledge, Erasmus elaborated arguments for the democratization of any other kind of knowledge. His move is crucial in understanding the continuous passage and transition at that time of ideas from philosophical works into religious thinking and texts, and also the other way round. Erasmus's ecosystem influenced the debate around a democratic vs aristocratic conception of knowledge, informing the generation of intellectuals who were the protagonists of the democratization of knowledge. In the Quattrocento, the vernacular language was used mainly for practical or religious purposes in everyday life. There were, of course, literary and poetic texts, but scientific and philosophical works were sparse. Erasmus provided theoretical grounds, educational intents and moral values for the processes of democratization and vulgarization to intellectuals who, at least since the beginning of the sixteenth century had been principally attached to the superiority of the Latin language and the culture of Humanism.

As will become clear, historically speaking this process of knowledge democratization invests religion and philosophy on equal terms: (1) summoning the same individuals; (2) being moved by similar intentions; (3)

17 There is at least one other important question, which I do not address in its entirety, but which I prefer to streamline from the very beginning – that is, what was democratized. As I have mentioned, the focus is the Aristotelian philosophy in Renaissance Italy.

employing identical techniques; and (4) targeting equivalent communities of recipients. Starting from Erasmus's platform, the central chapters of this book explore these four aspects. Chapter 3 reconstructs the identity of the democratizers of knowledge, examining their main intellectual characteristics, their philosophical interests, their professions, and their religious attitudes. Chapter 4 outlines the intention to democratize, which reveals not only a reaction to, and subversion of, the closing-off of access to knowledge and the closing-in of the authorities, but also an educational drive towards the progress of science and betterment of morality. Furthermore, it shows how not all intentions were fulfilled, pointing out the limits of knowledge democratization. Chapter 5 analyses the tools of the trade of these democratizers, – that is, the instruments through which they aimed to realize their intentions. These tools comprised mainly the vernacular as a "language of knowledge," and techniques for making a text more accessible, whether by translation or by simplification. Chapter 6, in contrast, addresses the question as to who were the recipients of this knowledge democratization. Following Natalie Zemon Davis's suggestion, the chapter distinguishes between an intended public – towards which works were directed – and the real audience – those who actually read and benefited from this knowledge.[18] This distinction is helpful in assessing the various stages of the realization of the process of knowledge democratization. The epilogue is an open conclusion, which ventures to shed some light on the consequences of the process of democratization of knowledge and indicates a possible future thread of research.

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