

DALLA RIVOLTA ANTISPAGNOLA A UN SOGNO DI LIBERTÀ*

Naples in the History of Europe: Rosario Villari and «Un sogno di libertà»
John A. Marino

This year 2013 celebrates the 500th Anniversary of the writing of Machiavelli's *Il Principe*. We all recall that the question at the center of *The Prince* is how to gain and maintain a new principate. In the first chapter, Machiavelli writes, new principates «o sono nuovi tutti, come fu Milano a Francesco Sforza [nel 1450], o come membri aggiunti allo stato ereditario del principe che li acquista, come è el regno di Napoli al re di Spagna [nel 1503]»¹. Machiavelli's two examples are the two great medieval principates that were taken by new princes at the beginning of the early modern period and that would become a part of the Spanish empire. Later in chapter three, Machiavelli divides the latter category, «questi stati, quali acquistandosi si aggiungono a uno stato antiquo di quello che acquista», into two kinds: «o e' sono della medesima provincia e della medesima lingua, o non sono. Quando e' sieno, è facilità grande a tenerli, massime quando non sieno usi a vivere liberi»².

In answer to the second more difficult case of newly acquired states added to one's existing territory but not being of the same province or language, Machiavelli develops his argument in chapter three and repeats in chapter five how to hold onto such new states, especially when they are accustomed to living free. He argues that there are three ways to proceed: 1) «non ci è modo nessuno

* I testi che seguono sono nati dalla discussione dell'opera di Rosario Villari, *Un sogno di libertà. Napoli nel declino di un impero 1585-1648*, Milano, Mondadori, 2012, svoltasi il 19 febbraio 2013 nell'ambito del corso di dottorato in Storia dell'Università di Napoli Federico II.

¹ N. Machiavelli, *Il Principe* (electronic ed. LiberLiber da L. Firpo, a cura di, Torino, Einaudi, 1972), chap. 1, http://www.liberliber.it/biblioteca/m/machiavelli/il_principe/html/princi_d.htm#capitolo1.

² Ivi, chap. 3, http://www.liberliber.it/biblioteca/m/machiavelli/il_principe/html/princi_d.htm#capitolo3.

securo a possederle altro che la ruina» (here Machiavelli is thinking of Tacitus in his *Agricola* on Roman imperialism in Britain where the Romans «make a desert and call it peace»³); 2) «andarvi ad abitare personalmente» («uno de' maggiori remedii e più vivi sarebbe che la persona di chi acquista vi andasse ad abitare»⁴), and 3) «lasciarle vivere con la sua legge» («l'altro migliore remedio è mandare colonie in uno o due luoghi»⁵).

Let's return to the initial example of the conquest of the Kingdom of Naples and look what happened in Naples under Spanish rule in the sixteenth and seventeenth century in the narrative of Rosario Villari. Machiavelli's first solution was, in fact, a satirical exaggeration that would negate the gaining of such a new State, because it would destroy the new State before it could even be governed. The second proposal was an improbable solution actually made during the revolt of Naples in the week of August 20-27, 1647, in the deliberations of the Council of Italy by counselor Miguel de Salamanca, «l'unico rimedio sarebbe la presenza di V.M., seguendo l'esempio dell'imperatore»; but it was never seriously considered nor even thinkable for Philip IV to go to Naples⁶. In the case of the third recommendation documented by Villari, Cardinal Richelieu remembered Machiavelli's *Discourses*, bk. 1, chap. 17 and 55 which claim that neither Milan nor Naples could be republics because they have «a corrupt *popolo*» and that the Kingdom of Naples and Lombardy do not have a tradition of liberty, but instead have a tradition of feudal estates in which noblemen «che oziosi vivano della rendita delle loro possessioni [...] comandano a castela, ed hanno sudditi che ubbidiscano a loro [...] tali generazioni di uomini sono al tutto inimicizi d'ogni civiltà»⁷. In sum, Machiavelli confirms Richelieu's fears that the division between the nobles and the *popolo* made independence and liberty in Naples impossible.

How then, in the judgment of historians, do we recount and remember the revolt of 1647 in Naples? Rosario Villari's book on the revolt, as its subtitle indicates, sets Naples in the context of «the decline of an empire,» just as John Elliott's subtitle in his equally magisterial study of Olivares places the king's

³ P. Cornelius Tacitus, *Agricola*, 30, <http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/tacitus/tac.agri.shtml#30>: «Auferre trucidare rapere falsis nominibus imperium, atque ubi solitudinem faciunt, pacem appellant.»

⁴ Machiavelli, *Il Principe*, cit., chap. 5, http://www.liberliber.it/biblioteca/m/machiavelli/il_principe/html/princi_d.htm#capitolo5.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶ R. Villari, *Un sogno di libertà. Napoli nel declino di un impero 1585-1648*, Milano, Mondadori, 2012, p. 421.

⁷ Ivi, p. 480, cites N. Machiavelli, *I Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio* (electronic ed. Biblioteca dei Classici italiani di Giuseppe Bonghi da Machiavelli, *Tutte le opere*, a cura di M. Martelli, Firenze, Sansoni, 1971), bk. 1, chap. 17 (<http://www.classicitaliani.it/machiav/mac32.htm#17>) and chap. 55 (<http://www.classicitaliani.it/machiav/mac36.htm#55>).

«statesman in an age of decline»⁸. These two books are among the most important contributions on the period of Spanish rule in the seventeenth century, and their enduring legacy is founded upon their enormous documental base, which remains fundamental for our understanding not only of the words and actions of the historical actors of the time but also of contemporary thoughts, reasoning, and mentality on the functioning of politics. As a narrative of decline, four general observations on the question of decline should help explain how Villari's arguments are organized around the ambiguity of words, the structure of narrative history, the models and sources employed, and the moral judgments explicit in «a dream of liberty.»

Two ambiguous words are in the title of the book: *un sogno* (a dream) and *la libertà* (liberty). A dream is something imagined, a sensation, illusion, delusion, fantasy, mirage, fabrication, *fantasma*, pretext, projection of the unconscious, vision, something totally unexpected, or so much out of the ordinary or so completely beautiful to seem unreal, even a wish, a desire, or a need, which would make *un sogno* in Italian also *un bisogno*. Dreams come to individuals when they are asleep and also when they are awake. Dreams can be an ideal, model, aspiration, or hope, either individual or collective. In the seventeenth century two famous dramatists, Shakespeare and Calderón de la Barca, invoked dreams in their playful juxtapositions between the real and the unreal, reality and illusion. For Shakespeare in *The Tempest* of 1610-11, Prospero concludes the so-called «revels» with reference to the actors as spirits who have «melted into air, And like the baseless fabric of this vision, The cloud-capp'd tow'rs, the gorgeous palaces, The solemn temples, the great globe itself, Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve, And, like this insubstantial pageant faded, Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff As dreams are made on; and our little life Is rounded with a sleep»⁹.

Shakespeare always plays with the metaphor that «All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players» with our own parts, and at the end all the beautiful palaces, sacred temples, and the globe itself – with reference both to the theater in London and the terrestrial globe – are made of dreams, which conclude with the sleep of death. Likewise Calderón de la Barca in *La vida es sueño* of 1636 promises that dreams always make things possible, an idea cited by Villari in the epigram on the first page of his book, «No se pierde el hacer bien aun en sueños» (Even in dreams don't miss the chance to do well)¹⁰.

⁸ J.H. Elliott, *The Count-Duke of Olivares: The Statesman in an Age of Decline*, Yale, Yale University Press, 1989, in Italian translation as *Il miraggio dell'impero. Olivares e la Spagna: dall'apogeo al declino*, Roma, Salerno editrice, 1991.

⁹ W. Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Act 4, scene 1, 148-158.

¹⁰ Villari, *Un sogno di libertà*, cit., p. 1, cites Pedro Calderón de la Barca, *La vida es sueño* (electronic ed. of M.D. Stroud based on the electronic edition of V. Williamsen and J.T. Abraham in the collection of the Association for Hispanic Theater, Inc.), Act 2, l. 2147,

In Calderón life is not a fiction, nor is it a prison determined by an absolute power; but without dreams and ambitions, there can be no change, no end to tyranny, no beginning to liberty.

Thus, «liberty» and «equality» seem both a dream and a reality. A list of similar words – *la riforma, la rivoluzione, la repubblica, la patria, la fedeltà, il declino*, and *l'impero* – open up this kind of inquiry to the multiple connotations that could mean all things to all men. The definition of these words changed slowly during this period, and often their meanings raised questions and debates. «Le riforme volevano ottenerle non per una benevola concessione “per gratia” ma per “giustitia”, intendendo con questo termine non un fondamento puramente legale ma un diritto naturale»¹¹. We have not yet arrived at the political philosophy of John Locke, the unalienable rights of «life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness» of Thomas Jefferson, nor the republican ideal of the French motto «liberté, égalité, fraternité» after 1789. Not only single words, but also phrases such as «il ritmo della storia europea», la «crisi generale del Seicento», and «il passaggio da un'economia feudale a un'economia capitalistica» form a political lexicon that opens up interpretations and above all reinforces the ties between Neapolitan and European history¹².

Villari's narrative of the «prehistory,» outbreak, compromise, and collapse of the revolt of 1647 in Naples follows a chronological analysis of an exhaustive inventory of the extant documentation left by a wide-range of actors from diverse perspectives. At the center of the argument is the identification of the revolt's cause and its failure as one and the same: «la profonda frattura interna della società e l'impossibilità della monarchia di riformare il sistema politico di quella sua provincia»¹³. The opposition of the nobility to reform and their alliance with the Spanish monarchy during the revolt insured that «la grande sollevazione del 1647 non fu una rivoluzione di tutta la nazione»¹⁴. The emphasis on the idea or hope, if not the fact or reality, of a unified nation is the foundational assumption upon which Villari constructs his incisive interpretation of the evidence. The introduction of dozens of details of a story in flux and the explication of innumerable plans and programs follow the tradition of classical history from Thucydides to Guicciardini. The lives of the players, the speeches and debates of insiders, outsiders, and anonymous writers – even the insertion of «un dialogo immaginario tra Olivares e Osuna» – and the general principles or rules of the game governing human nature and the nature of the

<http://www.trinity.edu/mstroud/comedia/vidsue2b.html>: «Que aun en sueños / no se pierde el hacer bien».

¹¹ Villari, *Un sogno di libertà*, cit., p. 402.

¹² Ivi, p. 11.

¹³ Ivi, p. 542.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

state structure Villari's story¹⁵. The narrative downplays phases or trajectories within the nine-month revolt in favor of circumstance, contingencies, and circumspection. The thrust of the narrative waits upon the proximate dispatch, the subsequent response, and the consequent result, either intended or unintended. At the same time, internal structural divisions propel and impede action. The unstable relationship between the nobility and the monarchy, the open hostility between the nobility and the *popolo*, the unequal exchange between the city and the countryside, the competition among the nobility of the *seggi*, the divisions within the *popolo*, and the shifting interventions of the Church often change the course of affairs.

Villari narrates «la molteplicità dei fattori dello sviluppo storico e il ruolo svolto dalle singole personalità» in order to weave together «le ombre dei protagonisti e le risonanze degli avvenimenti del 1647-48» into a set of interlocking themes on two complementary developments: «l'evoluzione dei modi e degli strumenti di governo e di opposizione dalla classicità rinascimentale all'età barocca»¹⁶. These themes reveal a range of interests at the center of Villari's inquiry into the baroque's «modelli di pensiero sulla società, sulla politica, sulla morale», namely, «l'uso della dissimulazione nei rapporti politici e sociali, le ambiguità del principio di fedeltà al sovrano assoluto, il passaggio dall'esaltazione umanistica alla condanna quasi universale della figura del ribelle, la popolarità dell'idea della ragion di Stato, i problemi della rappresentanza politica della nazione, le contraddizioni dello spirito barocco» (such as using the past to remake the present and future, and the confluence of ideas such as sensuality and mysticism, superstition and rationality, and natural right and absolutism)¹⁷. Villari's study of Napoli in its profound excavation of the nitty-gritty details of politics, economy, society, and culture employs all the social sciences in a total history that places Napoli squarely in the history of Europe. Villari responds to the question on the difference between European and Neapolitan history in two ways. First, he explains the rationale of the nobility's tradition to distance themselves from revolt, notwithstanding the Kingdom's grave difficulties during the seventeenth-century crisis:

Il rispetto dell'autonomia e delle ampie libertà che le antiche istituzioni assicuravano al baronaggio fu, dunque, parte integrante della tradizione politica del viceregno, che non venne abbandonata nel momento in cui l'impegno militare della Spagna raggiunse il punto culminante¹⁸.

¹⁵ Ivi, pp. 154-161. On the debate between classical and modern history over the use of speeches in historical writing, see A. Grafton, *What Was History? The Art of History in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp. 1-49.

¹⁶ Villari, *Un sogno di libertà*, cit., p. 5.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ Ivi, p. 26.

Secondly, Villari underlines the divergence of the Neapolitan nobility from the evolution of the early modern European state because Naples had no resident king or court. With the absence of a model of civility from the court, the fact that the Neapolitan nobility resided in the capital did not result in a reinforcement of the central State, the establishment of a political-social equilibrium, nor a weakness of feudalism in the countryside.

In generale, nella vita politica del Seicento, il concentrarsi della feudalità nella capitale, attorno alla corte, fu un fattore di rafforzamento dello Stato, di equilibrio politico-sociale, e una condizione di libertà per le stesse province. Il maggior controllo che il monarca poteva esercitare sull'aristocrazia, l'utilizzazione di alcuni suoi membri nell'apparato amministrativo e nell'esercito, il lusso cittadino, al quale essa era obbligata in una dispendiosa gara di emulazione provocata dalla vita di corte e dal formarsi di nuove fortune popolari, favorirono in molti casi l'eliminazione delle varie forme di anarchismo feudale. Questo fatto ha caratterizzato un momento particolare dell'evoluzione politica dello Stato nell'Europa moderna, ma l'inurbamento della nobiltà non ebbe in tutti i casi gli stessi effetti: in alcuni centri urbani, in alcune capitali (e Napoli ne è forse l'esempio più importante), l'inurbamento dei nobili non contribuì a mutare in modo sostanziale il rapporto tra città e campagna e non incrementò il rafforzamento dell'autorità statale¹⁹.

Villari's dual perspective on Neapolitan identity and the reciprocal influence of Naples in its relationship with the central monarchy in Castile as an autonomous kingdom and as a part of a «composite monarchy» in the Spanish imperial system is one of the central arguments and organizing principles of his study²⁰.

John Elliott emphasizes this local/pan-European perspective as a distinctive feature of Villari's scholarship in an appreciation of Villari's contribution to early modern European studies²¹. Elliott compares the importance of Villari's sustained investigation into the revolt of Naples in 1647 with his own work on the Catalan revolt, and he finds much common ground in their analyses of these two challenges to the Habsburg monarchy and its empire. Elliott goes on to enumerate the additional significant insights in Villari's studies on early modern Naples: the role of *feudalità* in the relationship between the city and the countryside, the intensity of fiscalism as a decisive factor in worsening the feudal offensive and complicating social relationships, the failure of reformism frustrated through unwillingness or incompetence, the problem of loyalty in the choice between the *patria* or the king, and the ambiguities created through

¹⁹ Ivi, 296-297.

²⁰ J.H. Elliott, *A Europe of Composite Monarchies*, in «Past and Present», 1992, n. 137, pp. 48-71.

²¹ Id., *Naples in Context. The Historical Contribution of Rosario Villari*, in *Storia sociale e politica. Omaggio a Rosario Villari*, a cura di A. Merola et al., Milano, Franco Angeli, 2007, pp. 33-45.

dissimulation. For Elliott, Villari's studies have evolved beyond a more simplistic center/periphery model into one of reciprocal exchange and often even local activism, such that the theoretically dependent Kingdom exhibited more creative and aggressive constitutionalist arguments against the centralizing tendencies of the monarchy. Strangely, however, Villari relies on Monarchomach texts on the theory of tyrannicide rather than the more obvious familiarity of the Neapolitan *togati* with Bartolus²². Finally, Elliott sees Villari's work opening up further research into two important areas: the informal relationships of clientelism lying under the surface of policy decisions; and the persistent ideology of republicanism diffused across the early modern period even in long-standing monarchical states.

Villari, for his part, thanks Elliott and finds his work on the Catalan revolt together with the tradition of English scholarship on the English Civil War by Christopher Hill and Lawrence Stone, as confirmation of his own convictions «sulla lunga genesi della crisi rivoluzionaria»²³. The Marxist historiographical approach of Eric Hobsbawm has a special place in Villari's thinking, but surprisingly the Marxist tradition and investigation of class as pioneered by E.P. Thompson finds no place in Villari's story of politics and social conflict. The historical anthropology of Peter Burke likewise is not cited after an earlier exchange rejecting Burke's cultural approach as not being grounded in politics, which is the essence of Villari's approach. Villari builds upon the early twentieth-century refutation of the myth of Masaniello by Michelangelo Schipa and responds to the questions raised by Roger B. Merriman's *Six Contemporaneous Revolutions* (1938).

During Villari's long research in contemporary sources at the British Library and in France, Spain, and Italy, he has promoted the publication of important, previously unpublished documents, such as the chronicles of Innocenzo Fuidoro, Camillo Tutini and Marino Verde²⁴. Adding twelve new chapters to a revision of his already classic *La rivolta antispagnola a Napoli. Le origini (1585-1647)*²⁵, Villari explains his now complete reconstruction of the long gestation and decisive conclusion to the revolt of Naples as both a deep internal story and a broad external one:

²² See Bartolus of Sassoferrato, *On the Tyrant*, trans. by J. Kirshner, in E. Cochrane and J. Kirshner, eds., *The Renaissance*, vol. 5, in *University of Chicago Readings in Western Civilization*, gen. eds. J.W. Boyer and J. Kirshner, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1986, pp. 7-30.

²³ Villari, *Un sogno di libertà*, cit., p. 5.

²⁴ I. Fuidoro, *Successi storici raccolti dalla sollevazione di Napoli dell'anno 1647*, a cura di A.M. Giraldi e M. Raffaeli, Milano, Franco Angeli, 1994; C. Tutini, M. Verde, *Racconto della sollevazione di Napoli accaduta nell'anno MDCXLVII*, a cura di P. Messina, Roma, Istituto storico italiano per l'età moderna e contemporanea, 1997.

²⁵ Bari, Laterza, 1967.

Mantenendo lo svolgimento narrativo e i contenuti storici della prima opera, ho mirato ad approfondire e ampliare l'analisi delle condizioni e degli avvenimenti interni, del loro rapporto con la storia generale della monarchia e della corrispondenza, nella coscienza del declino e nei tentativi di riforma, tra dominatori e dominati²⁶.

Villari presents overwhelming evidence of an unexpected dream of revolutionary liberty in numerous projects, proposals, and reflections that had long been lost to view. His thesis fits well with his earlier findings of a conscious, contemporary distortion of the causes and effects of the revolt, a misplaced emphasis on the illiterate fishmonger Masaniello, and a misconstruction of the objectives and motivations of participants and events. The protagonist was not Masaniello, but Giulio Genoino; the cause was not the *gabelle* on fruit, but the cause of liberty and the proclamation of a new independent Republic. Villari's final judgment is that the «rivoluzione napoletana e la sua sconfitta non furono soltanto la catastrofe di una provincia; furono anche un aspetto del lungo declino della monarchia, del suo ritirarsi dai problemi del mondo moderno»²⁷. Villari reminds his readers that this failure to confront the problems of the modern world had been long anticipated from Tommaso Campanella's first iteration of *La Monarchia di Spagna* in 1593-95, through the proposals of successive generations of reformers, and by the failed revolt of the *popolo* in 1647-48. In juxtaposition to Elliott's conclusion in his biography of Olivares that the vagaries of fortune had overcome the best laid plans of the Count-Duke, Villari's history of the twists and turns of contingency in the Neapolitan revolt, on the other hand, concludes with the simple fact that the best plans were never laid, as ill fortune marched over the monarchy's retreat from change to inevitable decline. Thus, «un cinquantennio in cui Napoli e la Spagna vissero la tragedia della rivoluzione e il tentativo, almeno in parte comune, di reagire al declino»²⁸ brought an end game which sadly turned the dream of liberty into a repressed memory to be reawakened in other days in other ways.

²⁶ Villari, *Un sogno di libertà*, cit., p. 7.

²⁷ Ivi, p. 547.

²⁸ Ivi, p. 551.