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Beyond translation II: Reinventing Constitutions for the Italian Regeneration

With the arrival of French army in Italy, Italian regeneration once again seemed possible. Along with new opportunities came new struggles, whether against the ancien régime elites or the French government's new geopolitical ambitions. Translations showcase how Italian revolutionaries sought to articulate new democratic models by interpolating French texts within their own writings or by disseminating new content under disguised titles.

Translations of revolutionary French texts made by Italian patriots were not simply a way to propagate French revolutionary thought. They were also used to communicate new political ideas and suggestions. While Ranza's alterations of Constitutional texts (seen in Part I of this blogpost) perhaps reflected propagandistic aims, the Tuscan revolutionary [Giovanni Fantoni](#) aimed for a more theoretical text that rearranged fragments and passages of translations, enriching them with commentaries. As part of his [Risposta al quesito «quale dei governi liberi convenga alla felicità dell'Italia»](#) – an official proposal for the newly born Lombard Republic in 1796 – he wrote a draft constitution in which he blended a slightly modified version of the [1793 French Constitution](#) with his own reflections on what a properly Italian democracy might need.

He also inserts a completely original Article (number XXII), dedicated to religion. In a classical deistic move, Fantoni recognizes its civic utility, reducing all cults to the moral core of a single social religion: *«[la religione sociale] non permette al cittadino di definire la divinità, ma tollera che le renda privatamente quel culto che più gli piace»*.

The actual constitutional laws are themselves taken from the original French text, but are adapted to reflect Italian geographic and demographic differences. Crucially, they also are expanded to take into account the educational and religious problems raised by the French Declaration, to the extent that Fantoni's Constitution can be considered an autonomous text in its own right. Of course, Fantoni was not the first patriot to use, in a more or less explicit way, sections of the 1793 Constitution inside another political text. For instance, the [«Catechismo su i diritti dell'uomo composto dai cittadini Tomaso ed Orsi, Patrioti Napoletani rifuggiti»](#) (Forte d'Ercole, probably 1794), adapted the question and answer format of the catechism as a simple but effective way of translating the 1793 Declaration of Rights.

But the political climate of 1796-1799 was radically different from the first years of the French Republic. After Thermidor, Jacobin ideas, whether expressed at home or abroad, were frowned upon by French institutions. Given that the Italian peninsula was an important front in the on-going war against the anti-French Coalition, its “Sister Republics” were – for bad or good – tied to France political developments. For all these reasons, Fantoni did not simply recover and repeat a Jacobin political agenda. Rather he used it as a platform to elaborate on what kind of democratic solutions were needed to address the complexity of Italian societies.

This intertwining between combination and rewriting of a translated source text is also present in the case of [Giovanni Labus](#). In 1797, his newspaper [«Nuovo giornale democratico di Brescia»](#) published a text titled *Diritti dell'Uomo*, which was presented as a miscellany of French constitutional principles. The first eleven articles derived from the Declaration of the [1791 Constitution](#). But starting from the 12th article, the author begins to introduce articles taken from the [1793 Declaration of Rights](#). Like Fantoni, Labus does not shy away from introducing articles of his own creation. Like Fantoni too, he upholds education as the key to a prosperous social body. For Labus, this implied the need to ensure that organs of democratic propaganda (notably newspapers and political clubs) were given complete freedom while keeping a close watch for any potential counterrevolutionary outbreaks.

By modern translation standards, Ranza, Fantoni and Labus exhibited a cavalier, almost careless attitude to the source text. But their hybrid, derivative works exemplify how the Jacobin positions of radical Italian revolutionaries were communicated. A close reading of how translation was used to adapt, expand, propagate or even, in some cases, resist key political positions shows how patriots perceived their own struggle for Italian regeneration. Translation also provides precious historical evidence for how the most pressing subjects of the day were debated within patriotic Societies and constitutional Circles. These include notably the debates around the aims of public and civic education, how to dismantle religious cultural-political influence over people, and how to construct a strong democratic identity through new institutions that could develop outside of French control.

Muddling any clean-cut distinction between "translation" and "source text", these examples of re-appropriation showcase how new ideas came to be articulated through a complex pattern of repetition, reception and reflection. Contrary to the more restricted understanding of translation associated with book-publishing today, revolutionary-era translation implied a broad understanding of cultural and even political agency. Crucially, translation enabled the debate of what constituted a properly democratic government to be expanded, furthering the circulation of radical texts by re-writing their contents to elaborate on their meaning and significance within the Italian context.

Of course, this understanding of translation as a type of political or social *action* is not limited to Italian revolutionaries. Such practices existed within the wider pan-European radical sphere of publishers, editors and writers. Nevertheless these Italian translations of French constitutional material, undertaken by militants of the revolutionary project, illustrate in a beautifully succinct manner how ideas circulated and flourished through translation in this tumultuous period.