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Beyond Translation I: Adapting Constitutions for the Italian Regeneration

When Revolution struck, it was greeted by many as an unforeseen yet irresistible new promise for the collective betterment of the human condition. For Italian patriots, their enthusiastic struggle for National Regeneration didn't imply a passive reception of French political achievements. On the contrary, they used translation to adapt the core tenets of the various French Constitutions to better reflect their understanding of their own complex cultural and political context, even altering them when needed.

The French upheaval reverberated across the fragmented Italian peninsula as no other event in the eighteenth century. "National regeneration" became a powerful new watchword. Around it coalesced reformist hopes, emergent social factions and progressive cultural positions – even divergent ones. For those advocating a radical reform of the State and economy, events in France served as a “proof of concept” for a general renewal of the existing order. Constitutional texts in particular were seen as effective and charismatic tools for political debate and propaganda.

But these “patriots” (as they called themselves) didn't simply receive revolutionary ideas. On the contrary, they elaborated on the events of France's political struggles in the effort to develop their own practical and ideological tools. Commentaries and translations were used as complementary tools as patriots sought to wrest hegemony away from *ancien régime* élites and to propagate a vision of national regeneration based on their own egalitarian and democratic ethos.

The first official translations of Constitutional texts into foreign languages were promoted by the French. The [Constitution of 1791](#) was translated into Italian (among other languages) on the initiative of the [Cercle Social](#) club, by the Italian professor Gaetano Boldoni, member of the Paris Lyceum. With the birth of the French Republic in 1792, the cosmopolitan spirit of this club was taken up by both the Jacobin and Girondin Conventions. In 1793, the [Imprimerie Nationale](#) of Paris published official translations of the [second Constitution](#) in all the main European languages.

At a time when censorship by the European authorities had forbidden the import of French newspapers, these translations aimed to faithfully propagate revolutionary ideas beyond the French border. With the military expansion of the Revolution, the context for such translations changed. After the successful Napoleonic campaign in Italy, [the Thermidorian Constitution of 1795](#) became probably the most widely translated French Constitution. At least eleven versions were published from 1796 to 1799 in different cities, by various editors and translators. This was hardly surprising, given that this Constitution was mostly imposed as a *de facto* model for all the “Sisters Republics” created by the *Armée d'Italie* during the three years of French influence over the Italian peninsula (the so called “*Triennio rivoluzionario*”).

Many Italian patriots considered the Thermidorian Constitution to be a notable achievement, but not necessarily adequate for regenerating Italian society. They were also deeply aware of France's internecine political struggles, as well as the cultural and political differences dividing the Italian context from the breeding ground of revolution. For these reasons, they were also greatly interested in previous constitutional texts, particularly the “Jacobin” Constitution of 1793, which seemed to more closely reflect their own political understanding.

Unofficial, alternative translations had already existed before the “Triennio”. These were communicated through newspapers and political pamphlets that had evaded counterrevolutionary censorship. A good example is the case of the [«Monitore italiano politico e letterario»](#), an Italian

newspaper published in France during the first half of 1793 by [Antonio Ranza](#), a Piedmontese exile in Nice.

Precociously fascinated by democratic solutions and yearning to propagate revolutionary ideas in Italy, Ranza used his newspaper to report on the debates on the new Constitution that had taken place in the National Convention. Translating articles from Parisian newspapers, he published his own versions of the 1791 and 1793 Declaration of Rights and part of the 1793 Constitution. These translations preceded [Carlo Lauberg](#)'s translation in 1793-1794. In 1798, Ranza's second attempt at translation was published in his newspaper [«Amico del popolo. Varietà istruttive. Continuazione ligure»](#). Ranza's keen interest in constitutional debates can also be seen in the fact that he translated both [Robespierre](#) and [Condorcet](#)'s famous Projects for the Declaration of Rights. These several translations constitute a unique case, given that Condorcet and Robespierre's texts only circulated in their original French version and both were censored in France during various phases of France's political struggle.

While Ranza's renditions were generally faithful, he habitually altered the number and order of the articles, following his own inclinations. He also sometimes added his opinion on the matter, cutting or expanding the original text where he saw fit. His translation of Condorcet's [Projet de déclaration des droits](#) gives us some good examples of his *modus operandi*. Firstly, Ranza's translation has 31 articles, compared to Condorcet's original 33. Ranza rearranges together Articles 23 and 24, but he completely omits Article 30. More importantly, Article 4: «*tout homme est libre de manifester sa pensée et ses opinions*» is expanded as follows: «*Ciascuno è libero di manifestare ciò che pensa, purché non intorbidi l'ordine pubblico*». The elaborate Article 32 – concerning the definition and right of resistance to oppression – is summarily translated as «*Gli uomini uniti in società devono avere un mezzo legale di resistere all'oppressione*».

This creative, non-linear approach to the translation and adaptation of democratic ideas reveals the desire of patriots such as Ranza to participate in constitutional debates. We see here how translation became a means to express new opinions and insights on the revolutionary process. This reveals an important element of other constitutional texts translated during the *Triennio*, especially those written during the first five years of French revolution.