

*Il tema*

FIFTY YEARS OF STUDIES  
ON TOLAND IN ITALY

MANLIO IOFRIDA  
(Università di Bologna)

It is in the twentieth century, and more precisely in the second half of it, that Toland's figure and intellectual activity have been rediscovered. In the following pages I shall try to answer this question: why in the last fifty years has Toland received so much attention? The first and obvious answer is that after the end of the Second World War the Enlightenment as a whole was revalued, after a long period of predominance of irrationalistic, frequently antidemocratic cultural trends. This revaluation of the Enlightenment took place according to a variety of philosophical premises: e. g. Hans Kelsen's Kantian conception of natural law, or the Marxist idea of Enlightenment as a progressive bourgeois culture. In any case, a common feature of these reinterpretations of the Enlightenment was the central role of politics – in French, *politique d'abord* is a very clear expression for it. All scholars who after the Second World War devoted their attention to Toland shared a firm belief in this assumption – in other terms, the idea of the civil, or social function of culture. I'll now, very briefly, review the most important of these studies.

In the first place, parallel and almost contemporary with the French studies by Naville and Vernière, who focused on Toland's materialism and Spinozism<sup>1</sup>, we have Franco Venturi's research, and especially his book on Alberto Radicati di Passerano<sup>2</sup>, in which Venturi stressed the influence of Toland's *Nazarenus* on the ideas of this Italian nobleman, who was a heretic, a rebel and a proto-communist. Also the chapter which Venturi dedicated to the English

commonwealthmen and Toland in his *Utopia e riforma nell'Illuminismo*<sup>3</sup> focused on politics: it was Toland's role in transferring the heritage of Italian and English republican tradition to the Enlightenment that was emphasized. Venturi's sketch of Toland remained, so to speak, canonical: an intellectual who was much more inclined to criticize and to deny, than to affirm and to build coherent systems and who was a propagandist rather than a deep philosopher.

Delio Cantimori's work, in this context, should also be remembered. In his famous essay on *La periodizzazione dell'età del Rinascimento*<sup>4</sup>, Cantimori, who had seen the roots of deism and tolerance in the Italian heresies of the XVI century, particularly Socinianism<sup>5</sup>, expressed the idea of a basic continuity of European culture between Renaissance and Enlightenment: this was fundamental for an accurate evaluation of Toland's importance, also from a philosophical point of view.

Eugenio Garin and Paolo Rossi, two eminent scholars in the field of the history of philosophy, devoted much attention to intellectual trends such as the Hermetic tradition, where humanistic, rhetorical culture and scientific approaches coexisted, and where ancient astrological and alchemical dreams and patterns of a new rationality, which aimed at the domination of the laws of nature, were closely linked<sup>6</sup>. As Toland translated Bruno, discussed with Leibniz and tried to interpret Newton in his own way, the importance of Garin's and Rossi's studies (as well as those of Frances Yates on the same subject) is obvious. Moreover, one must not forget that almost all these Italian scholars belonged, in different ways, to the Marxist area. Gramsci's thought in particular and his views on the role of intellectuals opened new perspectives of research in the field of popular religious movements, thus offering an important frame for the interpretation of Toland's figure.

It is still in the area of Marxism, and of a much more militant one, that we find Nicola Badaloni's work. His book on Giordano Bruno placed both the Italian philosopher and Toland in the line of materialistic philosophy – as some Sovietic scholars had already suggested<sup>7</sup>. But Badaloni belonged also to the group of Italian scholars we have just mentioned: like them, he stressed the conti-

## FIFTY YEARS OF STUDIES ON TOLAND IN ITALY

nunity between Renaissance and Enlightenment, Bruno and Vico, Renaissance pantheistic philosophies and Galileo Galilei's school on one hand and the materialism and libertinism of the XVII and XVIII century on the other. In the light of this research, Toland appeared as a Brunian as much as a materialist and a scientific *curioso*, an heir of Galilei. Later, when his Marxism became much more open, articulated and complex, Badaloni sketched a great "fresco" of pre-"Illuminismo" in his *Antonio Conti*<sup>8</sup>. Here Toland appeared as one of the main champions of the seventeenth century philosophy of order, more precisely, a materialistic philosophy of order<sup>9</sup>. It was a starting point for many researches, e. g. on the relation of Toland's philosophy with the libertine and pantheistic tradition (Bruno in the lead), and with Spinoza, Leibniz, Bayle, Malebranche and, in the XVIII century, with D'Holbach, Diderot and Voltaire.

Finally, we have to remember a historical fact which, to some extent, influenced Toland scholarship: the social and political stir in 1968. The hegemony of philosophies like those of Adorno and Marcuse put to an end the optimistic and "progressive" idea of the Enlightenment; science was, or was once more, accused to be oppressive and a tool of *Herrschaft*; Cantimori's and Garin's idea of a continuity between Renaissance and Enlightenment was largely discarded. Just then, in 1969<sup>10</sup>, M. C. Jacob published her essay on *Toland and the Newtonian Ideology*<sup>11</sup>, in which it was not difficult to grasp the new cultural and political atmosphere. M. C. Jacob's Toland was an enemy of the Newtonian and Lockean establishment. To the conservative ideology of Newton and his disciples, who supported the compromise of the Glorious Revolution and the beginning of "acquisitive capitalism" it represented, Toland and the free-thinkers opposed radical political and theological issues; his Brunian-hermetical universe, in which no hierarchy was respected and everything could become everything, was the counterpart of Newton's ordered and God-centred universe. It reflected, in its structure, the democratic ideals of the radical groups emerging from the revolution of the '40s. Hermetic and pantheistic philosophy was opposed to science; and Toland was presented as a

sort of revolutionary – the heir of the Diggers and the forerunner of the Jacobines: this was the rather provocative thesis of M.C. Jacob – a provocation undoubtedly effective, which should however not be overrated. On the contrary, one cannot overrate the work of Giancarlo Carabelli: his *Tolandiana*<sup>12</sup> are not a simple bibliography, but what in Latin is called a *seminarium*: countless seeds and tracks for research and inquiries are scattered in this work, an indispensable tool for scholarship regarding Toland.

Chiara Giuntini's book on Toland came out in 1979: it was the first scientific reconstruction of Toland's activity as a whole<sup>13</sup>. Concerning Giuntini's interpretation, two main points must be stressed: first, Toland is considered a major figure, but from what may be called, in a wider sense, a "political" point of view; Toland was neither a coherent nor a deep thinker, nor was philosophy the core of his personality and activity: only the reference to the historical, cultural and political context can shed due light on his figure. Following, in part, M.C. Jacob's interpretation, Giuntini stressed Toland's opposition to the compromise of the Augustan Age. Secondly, concerning the question of hermeticism, Giuntini pointed out the difference between Toland's materialistic and anti-magical hermeticism and that sustained by the "alchemic dreamers" of the sixteenth and seventeenth century. In other words, the *prisca philosophia* was not a univocal philosophical front: there were "conservative", or "reactionary" hermetic philosophers as much as "revolutionary", and Toland, of course, belonged to the latter. As Toland, although not at all a scientist, interpreted hermeticism in the light of the new science and defended materialism, he opened philosophical perspectives which were to be developed later during the Enlightenment, and in particular by Diderot and D'Holbach.

My book, which was published in 1983<sup>14</sup>, focused attention on the two fundamental aspects of Toland's thought: his deistic criticism of religion and his natural philosophy. On the one hand, I followed Badaloni's Gramscian Marxism and, in this sense, for me too the political aspect of Toland's activity was essential; on the other, influenced by philosophers such as Canguilhem, Althusser and Bachelard, I opposed the idea that Toland's importance was mere-

ly “ideological” and political, that he was not so serious a thinker: in this vindication of Toland as a philosopher, there was, as I can see it now, a good deal of overstatement. From a historico-philosophical standpoint, I interpreted Toland as a Spinozist – according to the French readings of Spinoza as that of S. Zac<sup>15</sup> and A. Matheron<sup>16</sup>. As regards religious criticism, I stressed the affinities between *Christianity not Mysterious* and the *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, taking in account, on the one hand, the Gramscian question of the relation between the intellectuals and the masses, and, on the other hand, the idea of community which Matheron had rediscovered in Spinoza. Concerning the philosophy of nature, I stressed the break between Renaissance thought and the new science; consequently, putting aside hermeticism and also Bruno, I tried to interpret Toland’s thought as a synthesis of Spinoza’s vitalistic philosophy and some vitalistic or nearly vitalistic positions of late XVII century science, including some disciples of Galilei.

Essentially, the main trend of research on Toland brought about these two images of his figure: on the one hand a Toland who appeared as a first, albeit confused incarnation of a *philosophe* and of the critical spirit, a kind of catalyst of the moments of renewal in many fields of knowledge, even at the expense of theoretical coherence. On the other hand, a Toland tendentially systematic, as close as possible to a Spinoza read as “revolutionary” and materialist.

In the following years there were many particular contributions which put into focus in a new way various aspects of Toland’s work<sup>17</sup>, but, from the point of view of an overall interpretation of his work, I wouldn’t say that we have witnessed substantial modifications. These particular research works generally slot into the channel of one or the other preceding interpretations, enriching them with entirely new chapters, but not modifying the overall theoretical picture. Such lack of a general questioning of this picture certainly does not depend on the fact that it is by now consolidated. On the contrary the cultural situation of the last twenty years has so rapidly and deeply changed that this picture has become obsolete. If the preceding research had already brought about a crisis

of the model which affirmed the continuity between Renaissance and Enlightenment and present times – the model which had constituted the channel in which the figure of Toland had received his cultural profile – subsequently the crisis of historicism became radical. Therefore, all cultural currents which, after Second World War, had been emarginated, became dominant, and the most various currents of German Romanticism, Nietzsche and Heidegger occupied almost unchallenged the cultural scene. In this context, the interest in Toland and more generally the Enlightenment has been *ipso facto* put in doubt<sup>18</sup>. Personally, while supporting some aspects of this cultural turning point that seemed to me incontrovertible, which destroyed old myths and dogmatisms, I have never agreed with its extreme aspects and in particular the liquidation of the Enlightenment culture. It seems to me that the present day historical-cultural situation is moving very much in this direction: the post-modern currents are themselves at a crisis point and after the hermeneutic-Heideggerian inebriation, after the definitive negation on the part of history and reason, there is a sense of surfeit and vacuum, a diffuse dissatisfaction with these cultural schemes. Within a perspective that opens out to a more measured assessment of Enlightenment and scientific reason, can we rethink the overall significance of Toland's work? Being perfectly aware of the absolutely provisional character of the following considerations, I'd like to present here a few potential replies to this question.

The aspect of Toland's work that we should focus on – and it is certainly not, in itself, an aspect which has not been emphasized in the past – seems to me to be that of his attempt to recreate a link, to rebuild a bridge between the philosophy of the Renaissance and that of his contemporaries, in particular Locke, Leibniz, Newton. I underline the term "attempt": today we can no longer think of that sort of "necessary" line that we believed in the 1950s. Quite the opposite – we have to emphasize the difficulties, the contradictions that this attempt entails. So, wasn't Toland, after the great separations that the XVII century had produced – between science and common sense, between subject and object, between individual and collectivity, – trying to recreate a link, to reconstitute a uni-

tary sense? Wasn't his reproposal of pantheism *after Descartes* an attempt to restore a sense to a series of entities that had become separated, autonomised, made alien and mechanical? And his giving a materialistic version of this pantheism – did this not constitute the precisely “modern”, post-Cartesian aspect of this attempt? Certainly, in taking these positions, Toland looked back, returned to a metaphysics of a Renaissance type in many ways surpassed and he fell into contradictions. We can't blame him for that, above all because we are not lacking in historical *pietas*, but, in second place, also for another reason: perhaps, if we assume an epistemologically and philosophically shrewder position, which is a good deal closer to us, the sense and direction of Toland's philosophical proposal and of its selfsame difficulties can return to us in a more stimulating light – which, without hiding its limits, enhance its value. The reference I'd like to propose is to the philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who, as is well known, paid constant attention in his theoretical work to some moments of the modern tradition, in particular those of the seventeenth century. It is precisely in his development of his fundamental theme of perception that Merleau-Ponty made an effort to discover a level in which the counterpositions of subject-object, subject-world, as clearly defined by Descartes, were not negated, but in some way reduced to a more fundamental reality. Perception, and also the experience of vision, which Merleau-Ponty explored deeply in the final part of his philosophical reflection, are on the same ground as that species of spiritus, that soul of the world, of *Spiritus qui intus alit* in which the subject is not external to things, but lives them from the inside; the *corps propre* at the same time both acts and is passive with respect to the world. Certainly, Merleau-Ponty was far from making this the metaphysical structure of the world, a theory of substance close to the Spinozist model; but, starting from the investigation into this *couche* of perception, he – as documented by his recently published lessons on nature<sup>19</sup> – reread with extreme acuteness a series of moments of the history of philosophy, in particular the philosophies of nature. Is this not a frame from which we can start in rereading many of Toland's philosophical positions? In this frame, haven't we

a new significance of the relation of Bruno with Toland? Couldn't we reconsider the fact, for example, that, before Schelling, Toland was the first to relaunch the great philosophical thought of the Nolan? And wouldn't then also the pairing of Bruno and Newton receive new light? It is clear that, from this perspective, the re-thinking of the Enlightenment would imply also that of the whole modern age, uncovering the tension between the various cultural currents that animated it: I want to say that Toland's cultural action in linking Renaissance and late-seventeenth century culture was certainly problematic and created difficulties the solution of which would have gone beyond the theoretical horizons of modern thought. But precisely for this reason its nerve centre and significance would be enhanced: his work could be seen as litmus paper revealing a series of nodes, crucial and unresolved, which were inscribed in his thought; the "contradictoriness", the abrupt leap between incompatible models could be seen as symptoms, not of a weakness of Toland's thought, but of a theoretical-philosophical situation objectively woven together with heterogeneous and contradictory threads.

I realise how vague and generic these formulations may be; they want at least to witness the need – that I believe is felt not only by myself – to rediscover the sense and value of modern philosophical tradition and, within it, of that undoubted protagonist that was John Toland.

#### NOTES

- 1 P. NAVILLE, *D'Holbach et la philosophie scientifique au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris, 1943 and P. VERNIÈRE, *Spinoza et la pensée française avant la Revolution*, Paris, 1954.
- 2 F. VENTURI, *Saggi sull'Europa illuminista: I. Alberto Radicati di Passerano*, Torino, 1954.
- 3 Torino, 1970, ch. II, pp. 61-87.
- 4 D. CANTIMORI, *La periodizzazione dell'età del Rinascimento*, in *Storici e storia*, Torino, 1971, p. 553 ff.
- 5 D. CANTIMORI, *Eretici italiani del Cinquecento*, Firenze, 1939.
- 6 E. GARIN, *La cultura filosofica del Rinascimento italiano*, Firenze, 1961; P. ROSSI,



FIFTY YEARS OF STUDIES ON TOLAND IN ITALY

- Clavis universalis: Arti mnemoniche e logica combinatoria da Lullo a Leibniz*, Milano-Napoli, 1960; ID., *Immagini della scienza*, Roma, 1977.
- 7 N. BADALONI, *La filosofia di Giordano Bruno*, Firenze, 1955; see also ID., *Appunti intorno alla fama del Bruno nei secoli XVII e XVIII*, "Società", XIV, 1958, p. 487 ff.
  - 8 N. BADALONI, *Antonio Conti: Un abate libero pensatore tra Newton e Voltaire*, Milano, 1968.
  - 9 N. BADALONI, *op. cit.*, esp. note 23, p. 221.
  - 10 It must also be mentioned, as one of the earliest studies, P. CASINI, *Toland e l'attività della materia*, "Rivista critica di storia della filosofia", XXII, 1967, p. 24 ff.
  - 11 "Journal of the Courtauld and Warburg Institutes", XXXII, 1969, p. 307 ff.
  - 12 G. CARABELLI, *Tolandiana*, Firenze, 1975; ID., *Tolandiana: Errata, addenda e indici*, Ferrara, 1979.
  - 13 C. GIUNTINI, *Panteismo e ideologia repubblicana: John Toland (1670-1722)*, Bologna, 1979. Some years before, A. SABETTI had published another monograph on Toland: *John Toland, un irregolare della società e della cultura inglese fra Sei-cento e Settecento*, Napoli, 1976.
  - 14 M. IOFRIDA, *La filosofia di John Toland: Spinozismo, scienza e religione nella cultura europea fra '600 e '700*, Milano, 1983; R. E. SULLIVAN, *John Toland and the Deist Controversy*, Cambridge, Mass.-London, 1982, is a well-documented reconstruction of Toland's deistical activity, but rather weak from a philosophical point of view.
  - 15 S. ZAC, *L'idée de vie dans la philosophie de Spinoza*, Paris, 1963.
  - 16 A. MATHERON, *Individu et communauté chez Spinoza*, Paris, 1969 and ID., *Le Christ et le salut des ignorants chez Spinoza*, Paris, 1971.
  - 17 G. CHERCHI, *Satira ed enigma: Due saggi sul Pantheisticon di John Toland*, Lucca, 1985; ID., *Eterodossia e dissimulazione nel Pantheisticon di John Toland*, Pisa, 1991; M. FICHANT, *Leibniz et Toland: Philosophie pour princesses?*, "Revue de synthèse", CXVI, 1995, p. 421 ff.; P. LURBE, *Le spinozisme de John Toland in Spinoza au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris, 1990, p. 33 ff.; ID., *Tolérance et citoyenneté*, in J. TOLAND, *Raisons de naturaliser les Juifs*, intr., trad., bibliographie et notes de P. LURBE, Paris 1998, pp. 1 ff.
  - 18 With two exceptions: 1) the most important recent event in Tolandian studies has probably been the fact that Ireland acknowledged Toland as a major Irish author. For this purpose, the post-modern culture was important: it laid stress on the "melting-pot" of cultures, on the multiplicity of identities – and these are relevant characteristics of Toland's figure; 2) in a recent essay (*Toland's semantic pantheism*, in J. TOLAND, *Christianity not Mysterious*, text, associated works and critical essays, Dublin, 1997, pp. 303-312) S. DANIEL used the post-modern model to reinterpret Toland's pantheism as a semantic, linguistic one; it is the only important post-modern interpretation of Toland I know: it is well-argued and not devoid of interest.
  - 19 M. MERLEAU-PONTY, *La nature*, Paris, 1995.

