18. THE ENLIGHTENMENT IN NAPLES

Melissa Calaresu

The history of the Neapolitan Enlightenment has often been told as a series of texts and authors, sometimes intersecting with politics at the end of the 18th century. Its wider social and cultural history remains to be written. In fact, there exists no comprehensive account of the Neapolitan Enlightenment to date. This chapter aims to map out the places and spaces and social dynamics as well as themes and topics of Enlightenment culture in one of the largest cities in Europe in the long 18th century. The throng on the street was remarked upon by travellers to the city from at least the 17th century; however, by the end of the 18th century, travellers often commented that there did not seem to be many signs of an enlightened society. As one of the best known French travel writers on Naples commented:

There are not as many men of letters in Naples as in Rome or in other cities of Italy; there is not enough emulation. The city has been nicknamed Otiosa because the effect of the climate, the fertility of the soil, and the indifference of the government have always contributed to making Neapolitans indolent. Nevertheless, there would have been greater activity if the heat of the climate had not prevented more application and work.¹

The power of tropes around the social, cultural, economic, and political decadence of the city was extraordinarily persistent throughout the 18th century, as it is in more recent historical writing, even if chapters in this volume demonstrate the vibrancy of the musical, literary, and scientific activities of early modern Naples.² In the 18th century, British and French writers in particular often found that intellectual life in Naples paled in comparison with what they were accustomed to in their own capital cities. Neapolitans writers responded to the characterization of their intellectual activities as decadent, backward, languorous, or derivative, defending themselves in journals, letters, and books. Interestingly, their defense attested to how Neapolitan writers were actively engaging with

¹ Lalande, *Voyage*, 6:363–4. All translations are my own.
² See also Calaresu and Hills, *New Approaches*.
the new communicative practices and social institutions of the European Enlightenment.³

It was, in particular, the lack of originality of Neapolitan writers, accused of having merely aped French ideas, on which critics of the Neapolitan Republic of 1799 placed the blame for its failure, and for the failure of enlightened reformers and later revolutionaries to engage with the practical realities of local conditions. Inevitably, the history of the Neapolitan Enlightenment has been tied to the history of the 1799 revolution, as was the case with French historians who wished to delineate the origins of the French Revolution in the ideas and institutions of the French Enlightenment. In most accounts, the failure of the short-lived republic simply reflected the failure of the Neapolitan Enlightenment. This characterization of the reform movement in Naples was reinforced in the chapter-length account of the Neapolitan Enlightenment by the Italian historian Franco Venturi, who divided the Enlightenment writers into two categories: those writers who were more philosophically minded and influenced by French ideas (Gaetano Filangieri, Francesco Mario Pagano, and Francescantonio Grimaldi) and those who addressed the specific conditions and needs of the Neapolitan economy and agriculture (Francesco Longano, Domenico Grimaldi, Giuseppe Maria Galanti, Giuseppe Palmieri, and Melchiorre Delfico).⁴ Venturi was picking up on a long-standing historiographical tradition. According to many writers and historians after 1799, in particular Vincenzo Cuoco (1770–1823), the predominance of the more utopian wing of the reform movement, with Pagano at its head as the writer of the 1799 constitution, determined the failure of the revolutionaries to bring to fruition the promise of the Neapolitan Enlightenment. By the end of the 19th century, this historiographical seam intersected with debates about the economic underdevelopment of the South, as part of the “southern question.”⁵

The historiographical influence of Franco Venturi on the interpretation of the Neapolitan Enlightenment remains strong, and the division between the philosophical and practical has, in part, determined historical writing on the subject until recently. Many contemporaries and

³ Calaresu, “The End.”
⁴ Venturi, “The Enlightenment,” 213. Venturi also made this distinction in his Riformatori, xv, discussed below. Girolamo Imbruglia also makes this distinction, between utopia and reform, in his excellent account of the Neapolitan Enlightenment: Imbruglia, “Enlightenment,” 84.
⁵ See Anna Maria Rao’s forthcoming article in Calaresu and Hills, New Approaches.