

Jacob Moleschott – a Transnational Biography: Science, Politics, and Popularization in Nineteenth-Century Europe, by LAURA MENEGHELLO, Bielefeld, Germany, Transcript-Verlag, 2017, 488 pp., €49.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-3-8376-3970-4

Laura Meneghello's monograph offers a detailed reconstruction of the biographical, academic and professional career of Jacob Moleschott (1822–1893), physiologist, politician and scientific populariser, born in the Netherlands and a naturalised Italian. As the author notes in the introduction (pp. 21–22), Moleschott was the research subject of her Master's thesis, in which she adopted the perspectives of 'history of philosophy' and 'history of ideas'. However, in her present work, a slightly revised version of her doctoral thesis, the author adopts a transnational approach, which, together with a methodology inspired by Entangled History, allows her to move through the different moments of Moleschott's life and intellectual trajectory, not only in a synchronic but also in a diachronic sense (p. 25). This approach allows her to limit her focus on Moleschott's scientific activities: the book is not intended to be a history of 'material culture' (p. 26), but rather a reconstruction of the dense network of international relationships in Moleschott's academic career, focusing on the 'entanglement' between science and politics (p. 27).

The volume is divided into nine chapters. In chapters 1 to 3, the author summarises Moleschott's youth and scholastic years, from his Jewish origins to his classical studies in Latin and Greek at the gymnasium in Cleves, from his medical studies to his work as a 'Privatdozent' (private lecturer) at the University of Heidelberg from 1847. Profoundly influenced by the liberal ideals of the Revolution of 1848–1849, Moleschott began his popularisation activities and published two major works during this time: *Physiologie der Nahrungsmittel* in 1850 and *Kreislauf des Lebens* in 1852. The latter caused him to leave the university because of its anticlerical and anti-religious ideas, considered dangerous by the University of Heidelberg. Both works already contain the core of Moleschott's thought: the 'unity of life', that is, the interconnection of life forms in an organic circle (the 'Kreislauf', a structure of philosophical thought clearly derived from Hegel). This is also reflected in the 'unity of the natural and human sciences', which for Moleschott are indissolubly linked. This *leitmotif* of Moleschott's philosophical-scientific thought was moulded during his stay in Zurich, where he became professor of physiology in 1856. There, he had the opportunity to extend his network of contacts with intellectuals, academics and scientists from all over Europe, including Francesco De Sanctis, who proposed him as a professor at the University of Turin.

Moleschott's long Italian period, first in Turin (1861–1878) and then in Rome (1878–1893), is scrupulously reconstructed in chapters 4 and 5. In Turin, stimulated by a vibrant academic atmosphere, not dominated by Catholicism, open to political pluralism and interculturalism, Moleschott produced a series of works which are fundamental to the understanding of his activities as a populariser. Among these, the author places particular emphasis on *Physiology and Medicine* (1865), *Causality in Biology* (1867), recalling especially the popular text *A Physiological Embassy* (1864), according to the author one of the most 'witty' speeches, in which Moleschott demonstrates his oratorical and persuasive abilities (p. 212). His activity as a promoter of science reached its peak in the 'Roman period', together with his political activity as a senator and his attendance at the literary salons of Rome (the reference to the Oratorio in Via Belsiana, where Moleschott fraternised with Gabriele D'Annunzio and met Giuseppe Verdi, is a useful and well contextualised excursus, p. 247).

In chapters 6 to 9, Meneghello follows the path that would lead Moleschott to play an increasingly greater role as a populariser, both in the political debate in the Senate and in the public sphere. She begins by laying out aspects of Moleschott's political cultures, especially the speeches in the

Senate (e.g. his speech on Darwinism in 1882, the discussions on the introduction of physical education at school, and on the abolition of the grist-tax) but also at the International Conference on Health and the Conference on Criminal Anthropology in Rome, both in 1885. After that, she looks at the role of Moleschott as cultural mediator, underlying the debates on the reform of the Italian system of higher education in 1886–1887 and the central function of the translations of some of his important scientific works (e.g. the correspondence with Cesare Lombroso regarding the translation of his most important publication, *Kreislauf des Lebens*, from German into Italian). Lastly, the author gives space to the celebrations in honour of Moleschott after his death in 1893, during which the political, intellectual and cultural world acclaimed him as an ‘academic hero’ (p. 437).

The ‘apparent paradox’ (p. 441) of, on the one hand, Moleschott’s truly international career, and on the other, his political and cultural activity devoted to the promulgation and defence of the idea of the nation-state, is one of the main features of Moleschott’s biography and, at the same time, the interpretative key to his political thought. For him the modern, Western, European nation-state (in particular the post-unification Kingdom of Italy, of which he became a citizen as early as 1867), built on liberal foundations, represents the true realisation of scientific and human progress. In the construction and realisation of a liberal and secular state, the natural and human sciences are invested with a ‘civilizing mission’. Despite their necessary autonomy and independence, for Moleschott the sciences represented the ideal and central moment of the formation of free thought, and therefore, had a vital role in the education and development of the masses. In this sense, Moleschott’s cultural policies cannot be understood separately from his scientific materialism: both were truly inspired by a profound ‘civil vocation’.

Despite the fact that, in several passages, the author anticipates (perhaps a little hastily) elements of analysis that will be taken up only later in the text, the volume fully succeeds in its intention: to give the reader a portrait of a scientist, academic, free thinker and populariser, whose career was *de facto* transnational – proof of the profound entanglement between science and politics in Europe during the ‘long nineteenth century’.

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Napoli. Viaggio nella città reale, by PAOLO FRASCANI, Bari-Rome, Editori Laterza, 2017, 218 pp., € 11.00 (paperback), ISBN 9788858125939

In his new book, social historian Paolo Frascani reconstructs Naples’ most recent history and current state of affairs. He contends that the recent refurbishing and tourist boom have woken Naples up from its apparent torpor, but have not solved its structural problems, such as unemployment, low security, illegal activities, and crime (especially in the inner city). The author highlights not only the unresolved problems, but also the city’s often unrecognised and undervalued resources to resolve them.

The first chapter (‘Storie di ieri e di oggi’, pp. 3–33) reviews Naples’ current problems through its recent history. The city, Frascani contends, still suffers heavily from the dismantling of the Ilva