



Dr. Carmen Emanuela Ragusa, PhD

Encounter between the Orient and the West. Orientalism in Leone Caetani's Work I.

ABSTRACT

East - West dialectics has a more than ever urgent actuality today. Leone Caetani anticipated the potential implications of colonization that had already occurred during the occupation of Africa in the early 20th century: in his historiographic work, he focused on the ideas such as "experience" and "people" and their importance in historical research. He synthesized new historiographic concepts, such as those of "*Decadenzidee*", marked by the intersection of religion and democracy, ethics and politics immanent to the dialectics in the dominated – dominant relationships. He identified the only possible key to coexistence in mutual recognition that is dedicated to peace and respect.

Dr. Carmen E. Ragusa, PhD in "History of Philosophy" at the University of Sciences of Catania. In her discussion of the thesis, in "History of Philosophical Historiography" (2011), she addresses the theme of Orientalism in connection with Islamism and the historiographic debate of the twentieth century, focusing particularly on the Islamic and Christian dialectic, and the incessant act and reaction of the East and West as the basic theme of the historiographical thought of Leo Caetani, Prince of Teano and Duke of Sermoneta.

BIO-BIBLIOGRAPHICAL PROFILE

1.1 - Leone Caetani's life

Leone Caetani, Prince of Teanus and Duke of Sermoneta, was born in Rome on September 12, 1869, and he died in Vancouver on December 25, 1935. His noble family includes authoritative figures such as Pope Boniface VIII; Honorable Caetani, Foreign Minister in the Second Government of Rudin, and mayor of Rome; Michelangelo Caetani, a renowned Dante expert and governor of Rome at the time of its accession to the Kingdom of Italy. The family name comes from the city of Gaeta, of which the family is native.



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Leo Caetani was very passionate about Middle Eastern civilization, and he acquired a profound knowledge in this field, thanks also to the many trips he made to the region. In 1901, at the time of his marriage with Princess Vittoria Colonna (who came from a family that was hostile to The Caetanis for centuries) the prince made the Caetani Palace in Via dei Botteghe Oscure his residence that also housed his rich library. There, with the assistance of well-known academics and young scholars, such as Giuseppe Gabrieli, Michelangelo Guidi and Giorgio Levi Della Vida, he began to publish the famous "*Annali dell'Islam*" that has attracted the attention of European orientalists ever since. While planning the publishing an Italian bio-bibliography dictionary, Caetani was elected as a member of Parliament representing the Democratic Constitutional Party.

Between 1888 and 1894 he travelled to Mediterranean Africa and Asia. In 1892 he graduated in History at the La Sapienza University of Rome, with a thesis on "Paolo Alaleone de Branca, master of the Pontifical Ceremonies".

At an early age he started to learn Oriental languages, such as Arabic, Turkish, and Persian. In his Orientalist studies he intended to focus on the original characters of the Islamic empire rather than to deal with the ideological and religious controversies. In 1905 the first volume of the "*Annali dell'Islam*" was published, while the next nine volumes appeared between 1907 and 1926, although all of them had been practically finished before 1915.

He became a member of the Accademia dei Lincei in 1911. As his marriage fell apart, Caetani continued his studies. After the world war he helped ex-combatants. The impossibility of marrying again and legitimizing her daughter, forced him to settle in Vancouver in 1927, where he would live until his death, spending most of his time farming, surrounded by the affection of his new family.



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In order to preserve the precious cultural and scientific heritage, i.e. his valuable collection that has been developing since then, in 1924 Caetani promoted the establishment of the "Caetani Foundation for Muslim Studies" at the Accademia dei Lincei. In 1928 he obtained Canadian citizenship, while the Italian was denounced by the regime in April 1935, which also removed his name from the list of the members of the Accademia dei Lincei.

Towards the end of his life he felt disappointed: in his letter to his faithful student, to the enthusiastic Giorgio Levi Della Vida, he wrote such words as *"I became what the English call a failure ... I did not succeed at all."*¹

Despite his feelings about his own life and achievements, the future generation highly appreciated his life works: at the end of the nineties of the last century, a school was dedicated to his name in the town of Cisterna di Latina, a town which has long been subject to the Caetanian rule.

1.2 – The testimony of Levi Della Vida

In the book *"Fantasmi ritrovati"* Leone Caetani's most loyal friend and disciple, Giorgio Levi Della Vida reveals the unexpectedly human nature of his master's personality, starting from the analysis of the characteristic traits of his noble family; it is striking to see here, the mixed feelings of admiration, devotion, and fear with which the student is getting acquainted more and more with his teacher: - *[...] a physical sense of distance already came from his immense stature, the legacy of the Polish aviaries [...] the smallness of the head just seemed to be attenuated by the frame of a pointed beard [...]. Everything in the gesture, calm in the tone of voice, was of impeccable courtesy [...].*²

¹ G. Levi della Vida, *Fantasmi ritrovati*, op. cit., p. 68.

² *Ibidem*, p. 52

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Before proceeding it is important to remember Levi Della Vida's warning: - *If the pages that follow will find some readers, I would always like to keep in mind that they do not propose to present the biography of those who meet them as personalities, neither to discuss the merits or demerits of each of those, but only to represent what the author has come to do: he did not want to replace his judgment with that of history, which may be different from his own.*³

In the light of such forethoughts, Della Vida describes Caetani with deep respect and amazement, since it was rather rare that an aristocrat of his caliber would pursue a scientific work for pure love for knowledge, outside of any economic and academic interests. According to Levi Della Vida's opinion, one of the specific moments of Caetani's life was the denial of the serious illness of his son, which determined not only the crisis and the end of his marriage but also the impossibility of completing the colossal work of the "Annali dell'Islam": - *I cannot say exactly when the psychic malaise of the young son manifested itself in its total and irreparable form: I did not see him again only many years later [...] when his father had died for a while, and when he had become Onorato VI, Duke of Sermoneta. Or rather he was a caricature, grotesque and tragic, as if he had come out of a fantastic delirium: the gigantic paternal stature that was rattled and pierced by its curved shoulders and its neck; the big fat head with a red-colored face and two bovine eyes which insensible look was accentuated by the thickness of myopic lenses; the jumping steps and the gesturing of a puppet.*⁴

³ Ibidem, p. 18

⁴ Ibidem, pp. 56-57



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1.3 - His Studies and the Caetani Foundation in Rome

Leone Caetani graduated in 1892, and after studying Arabic, Hebrew, Persian, Sanskrit and Assyrian (perhaps even Turkish) with various professors, including Ignazio Guidi and Giacomo Lignana, he started the great project of writing the history of the early Islam, with an introduction to the period preceding the political and spiritual action of Muhammad; this work was to be based on accessible Islamic sources, which himself had studied with tireless fervor and with the help of capable collaborators (including Levi Della Vida, Gerardo Meloni and Michelangelo Guidi). Of the *"Annali dell'Islam"* thus designed, only 10 volumes emerged, which, however, were able to cover a significant period of activity of the prophet of Islam and that of the first four "orthodox" caliphs. Political and human affairs definitively distanced Caetani from the initial proposition. But the work thus undertaken remains memorable, even allows scholars to consult materials otherwise difficult to find. The establishment of the Caetani Foundation, at the Reale Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, dates back to the early 1920s, and retains, in addition to original or reproduced oriental prints and manuscripts, thousands of documents and Caetani's own notes. A life, that of Prince Leo Caetani, which, now emerging from "his" archive, appears dense of events and initiatives, and not just cultural ones. The Foundation has abundant material that, in 922 folders, constitutes, along with the important library, the legacy left by the Orientalist prince to Lincei. From the biography written by Giuseppe Gabrieli, emerges the figure of an enthusiastic and self-taught researcher of Oriental languages, who is neither a romantic traveler and explorer, nor a stubborn champion and propagator of Islamic history, religion and culture. Gabrieli notes, inter alia, the close link between the journeys of the prince and the establishment of the Caetani Foundation: *'In the course of his journeys and his studies in the East and in the West the Duke had the opportunity and care to purchase a large number of Oriental and Orientalistic books and manuscripts, - particularly relevant to the history, geography, ethnography, literature of those peoples -, that formed his own*

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*precious library, which soon was enriched with several hundreds of volumes and photographic copies of the rarest and ancient Arab, Persian and Turkish manuscripts with historical and geographical content [...] About his unique collection of scientific book material for the study of the East, and especially of the Muslim world, Caetani wanted to assure scholars, companions and prosecutors of his work by donating it, with actual full donation, to the great and only National Academy of Sciences in Italy, to the Lincei' Royal Accademy, of which he is a member [...] Thus the idea of this Foundation, that bears his name, was born, and it was promptly translated into effect, with the benevolent consensus and applause of academic colleagues.*⁵

Therefore the basis of the Foundation's project was Caetani's purpose to save his library and its archives in those years when the fascist regime took over in Italy, which then determined the fate of exile of the duke of Sermoneta.

1.4 - Political activity: against the Libyan expedition

Leone Caetani was elected as a member of the Italian Parliament on the eve of the Fascist adventure. He was a Democrat with faith in liberalism and in the parliamentary system.⁶ It became clear that his deep opposition against the Italian-Turkish war of 1911, which was promoted by Giovanni Giolitti, brought on him the hostility of the aristocracy. Later, the hostility of fascism was added to that, which removed his citizenship and expelled him from the Lincei' Academy. Nevertheless Leone Caetani enjoyed the total scientific solidarity and admiration of the intellectual world, both in Italy and abroad, so that his "*Annali dell'Islam*" are still one of the works in Italian to be regularly studied and quoted in the fields of foreign languages. The anti-colonialist impetus took shape in 1911 when Italy thought of taking Libya, establishing a domain that would only end with the defeat in World War II.

⁵ G. Gabrieli, *La Fondazione Caetani per gli studi musulmani*, Roma, Reale Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, Fondazione Caetani, 1926, p. 5

⁶ F. Gabrieli, *La storiografia arabo-islamica in Italia*, Napoli, Guida, 1975, p. 61



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The story of this conquest begins at least a decade earlier, when the territories beyond Sicily started to attract the attention of Italian governors and businessmen. The Italian government began to weave a complex diplomatic texture so as to allow to annex this country without great resistance from the great European powers (eg.: through the activity of the Banco di Roma, which since 1907 had set up a branch in Tripoli, that financed various businesses in Libya), with the support of journalists, listing the advantages, first of all, the possibility of economic development that would enrich also the Libyans themselves, and which would be beneficial for the Italian working classes, that would no longer be forced to emigrate to foreign countries. However opponents of the invasion, Turati, Salvemini and Nitti, denounced the false illusionism of the alleged wealth of the mines and agriculture of Libya. Caetani's article in the daily "*L'Unità*" of May 4, 1912, based on geographical and historical texts, attempted to dispel the false conviction of the potentially rich and still intact agricultural resources of Libya. In spite of these unfavorable voices, the President of the Council, Giolitti carried out his plans, and in September 1911 he decided to invade Tripolitania and Cyrenaica militarily. It was clear that no one knew the mentality of the indigenous people, and certainly not of the various tribes, inhabitants of the region; no one, except Leo Caetani, - who in June 1911 warned the Parliament with a farsighted speech that disapproved the invasion - mentioned that on the basis of the Libyan hostility towards the Turks, it was not advisable to think that the Libyans would be willing to surrender to the Italians. In October 1912 the conquest of those territories was completed. The Italian colonialist activity got a new impetus with the advent of fascism, which aimed at conquering the entire Libyan territory. The demographic colonization of the country was carried out by the neo-governor Italo Balbo. For Balbo, Libya had to become the fourth coastline of the country, a sort of stretch of the peninsula, which natural resources had to be exploited.

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However, later the outbreak of World War II blocked all these activities. As Giorgio Boatti recently recalled, - [...] when in February 1912 the House of Representatives voted in favor of the decree annexing Libya to Italy, there was a lonely voice that, - in tune with beliefs that have matured in years of study and reflection- , was definitely against the measure. Shattering the unique voice of the parliamentary deployment, supported only by the solidarity of the representative of Ivrea, of Count Emilio Pinchia, Caetani pronounced a nice "no", plainly and without second thoughts, a true condemnation, without appeal, of the colonial policy of Giolitti. The "no" of Caetani was the fruit of a tough opposition he had already expressed in previous months against "Tripoli's cheating" but, in the first place, it was the result of his deep knowledge of Oriental civilizations acquired through countless journeys in Arab countries, in Persia, in Mesopotamia. But the voice of the scholar seemed to be unimportant in the face of imperialist claims. With his "no", Caetani would become the target of a ruthless campaign of defamation and mockery. All this is the general proof of the "descending into the field" strategy of that interventionist nationalism, contemptuous of any rule of civil confrontation, which, from then on for three years, would fill the Italian squares After the courageous speech of February 23, 1912, Caetani experiences on his own skin how virulent and pervading this nationalism is, "a microbe", which disrupts the brains.⁷

Yet, despite the isolation, Caetani was not intimidated, and he did not change his position, as a testimony to the moral toughness and intellectual independence that were characteristic for him. Indeed, if at the height of the political career there was this opposition to the Libyan affair, Caetani was an unlucky protagonist of the proportional re-election attempt against Giolitti.

⁷ G. Boatti, La Stampa-Tuttolibri», 11 novembre 2004.



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Despite the disappointment, Caetani did not stand apart from the events of the world war: at the age of 46, though not young, he did not withdraw from civic engagement: *he interrupted his research works and studies, and served humbly and silently the country in war. In addition to a feeling of civic duty, he was also motivated by the idea according to which the chivalrous tradition obliges the aristocracy to take their weapons in war.*⁸

⁸ G. Levi della Vida, *Fantasma ritrovati*, cit., p. 59