

# Democracy and the Vernacular Imagination in Vico's Plebian Philology

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## ABSTRACT

This essay examines Giambattista Vico's philology as a contribution to democratic legitimacy. I outline three steps in Vico's account of the historical and political development of philological knowledge: first, his merger of philosophy and philology, and the effects of that merger on the relative claims of reason and authority; second, his use of antiquarian knowledge to supersede historicist accounts of change in time and to position the plebian social class as the true arbiters of language; third, his understanding of philological knowledge as an instrument of political change, and a foundational element in the establishment of democracy. In its treatment of the philological imagination as a tool for bringing about political change, Vico's plebian philology is radically democratic and a crucial instrument in the struggle against the elite from antiquity to the present.

Giambattista Vico experienced a conversion midway through his intellectual journey. Longing for a more philological philosophy, the Italian thinker and rhetorician became persuaded that a turn to the vernacular was the surest way of achieving this aim. Both the philologists and the philosophers, he discovered, were in error, having forgotten each other's truths. Inquiring into the origins of the dissension between philosophy and philology, Vico alighted on two codicils:

1. Vulgar letters, originating with mathematics, led human beings to the metaphysics of philosophy.
2. As the heroic language first separated the heroes from ordinary humans, so later vulgar language divided philosophers from philologists.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Joh. Baptistae Vici [Giambattista Vico], *Notae in duos libros alterum* (Naples: Felix Musca, 1722), 38, reprinted in "On the Constancy of Philology," *New Vico Studies* 23 (2005): 230–308, at 275. This is the third volume of the work that Vico called *Il diritto universale* (Universal law).

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247

From these two historical processes, the birth of writing and the separation of the vernacular from the literary language, Vico arrived at the penultimate moment in his genealogy of human knowledge. A division ensued between philosophers, who investigate the nature of things, and philologists, who study the origins of words. This division was to determine, even overdetermine, the subsequent course of thought as well as politics well into the present. And so, concluded Vico, “philosophy and philology, born together like twins from the heroic language, were severed by the vernacular [*lingua vulgari*]” (DCP, 107).<sup>2</sup>

The severance inaugurated by the introduction of the vernacular led to a division between philosophy and philology that contributed to the flourishing of ancient Greek civilization. Vico contrasts philosophy, the discipline concerned with natural law, with philology, the discipline concerned with contingency and convention, including the convention of language. Philology is concerned with the sources of authority, and access to it confers power. Concerned with the preconditions for political speech, it is linked genealogically to vernacular knowledge. Traversing Vico’s disciplinary identity, his polemics with Augustine, and his reading of Roman law, this essay examines how the Italian thinker’s discovery of vernacular philology motivates the democratic (and demotic) orientation of his political thought.

From *De antiquissima*, the first noncommissioned philosophical treatise he ever wrote, to the final edition of the *New Science*, published six months after his death, Vico staked out for himself a philosophical terrain navigable only through the philological method. Judging based on influence, Vico’s philosophy was more successful than his philology, but a full grasp of his work requires that the two knowledge forms be examined in their mutually constitutive relations. Rather than disencumbering Vico’s philosophy from its “philological wrapping” and judging it on purely philosophical grounds, as some have advocated, I aim to think these two distinct, yet intimately related, forms of knowledge together.<sup>3</sup>

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2. Works by Vico are cited parenthetically in the text by the following abbreviations: *De constantia philologia* (Naples: Giuseppe Jovene, 1841), cited as DCP; *Principe di scienza nuova*, 3rd ed., in *Opere, a cura di Fausto Nicolini* (Milan: Ricciardi, 1953), cited as SN; *The Autobiography of Giambattista Vico*, trans. M. H. Fisch and T. G. Bergin (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1944), cited as AGV; *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, ed. Manuela Sanna (Rome: Edizione di Storia e Letteratura, 2005), cited as DA; and *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians*, trans. L. Palmer (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), cited as MAWI.

3. The words are those of James Morrison, “Vico’s Principle of *Verum Is Factum* and the Problem of Historicism,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 39, no. 4 (1978): 581.

### PHILOLOGY'S VERNACULAR ORIGINS

Any account of Vico's plebian philology must first wrestle with the ubiquitous conflation of Vichian philology with history.<sup>4</sup> Erich Auerbach, himself the translator of the first half of Vico's *New Science* into German in 1924 and one of the twentieth century's greatest philologists, sanctioned this conflation when he noted that "each historian" can be called "with Vico's terminology, [a] 'philologist.'"<sup>5</sup> But is "history," even in Auerbach's sense, analogous to Vichian *filologia*? Auerbach's characterization of Vico's methodology as one that included "not only political history in its specific sense, but also the history of expression, of language, of script, of the arts, of religion, of law" (32) suggests that Vico's proclivities lay in forms of historical inquiry that long predate modernity.

Auerbach elsewhere emphasized that Vico's term of choice for his vocation was philology rather than history, but he did not distinguish between these forms of knowledge. Auerbach could access no direct corollary for antiquarian knowledge (other than philology), and history by the twentieth century had subsumed within itself the antiquarian methodology. Constrained to read according to these horizons, Auerbach grafted onto Vichian philology a method that was disturbed by his belief in the veridicality of myth. How many historians today would claim with Vico to have produced a "philosophical criticism" capable of tracing "a natural theogony, meaning the genealogy of the gods as it was naturally created by the founders of the pagan world" (*SN* §§392, 7, 69)? A modern historian would be deterred from any aspiration to prove that humans descended from giants, and that the myths concerning Jupiter, Mars, and Minerva were factually true. By advancing such claims, Vico's sacral hermeneutics disrupts the historicist forms of reasoning based on causality, even as his philosophy

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4. The first English translator of the *New Science* tells us in his classic account of Vico's interpretation of Roman law that Vico understands "philology" in the sense of "history" (Max H. Fisch, "Vico on Roman Law," in *Essays in Political Theory: Presented to George H. Sabine*, ed. Milton R. Konvitz and Arthur E. Murphy [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1948], 65); this is not the case even with reference to the specific passage Fisch relies on. Likewise, Leon Pompa passes judgment on the presumed equivalence between "philology" and "history": "[in Vico] 'philologist' is given the meaning which the term 'historian' now possesses" ("Vico's Science," *History & Theory* 10, no. 1 [1971]: 51). In their translation of Vico's *Autobiography*, Fisch and Bergin make the following editorial interpolation: "philology [= historiography]" (*AGV*, 157; brackets in the original).

5. Erich Auerbach, "Vico's Contribution to Literary Criticism," in *Studia philologica et litteraria in honorem L. Spitzer*, ed. Anna Granville Hatcher (Bern: Francke, 1958), 35. Notwithstanding Auerbach's stature as a major literary critic, his reading of Vico misses the political salience of Vico's interweaving of philosophy and philology as well as the democratic implications of his decision to ground human knowledge in plebian philology.

of history has entered into the common sense of modern historiography.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, Vico's antiquarian philology remains relatively undeciphered to this day, while its political implications unexplored. With notable exceptions, scholars who read Vico as Marxist avant la lettre tend to ignore his philology, while scholars interested in his philology tend to focus on it in relative isolation from his political theory.<sup>7</sup> The pages that follow tease out the political vision underpinning this philology.

### MAKING TRUTH

One of Vico's most important contributions is his *verum-factum* principle, which he first began to elaborate in his *De antiquissima* (1710). Distinguishing between the true (*verum*) and the made (*factum*), Vico argues that the true and the made are interchangeable (*verum esse ipsum factum*). From the premise that truth is knowable only insofar as it is made, it follows that we create what we know. In the *New Science*, the distinction between the true and the made illuminates historical and disciplinary knowledge. *Verum-certum* is for Vico the principle according to which we distinguish between what is knowable without mediation and what must be taken as given without being subjected to rational inquiry. While the epistemological implications of the *verum-certum* distinction are not yet fully developed in *De antiquissima*, its philological fundament is amply in evidence in the earlier text.

*De antiquissima's* primary aim was to examine the philosophical understanding of the ancient Italians through a philological inventory of the Latin language. Vico immediately realized that he would have to have recourse to literary texts, in particular to the plays of Terence and Plautus, in his efforts to reconstruct the language of ancient Italian wisdom. So, while framing his book as a philosophical invective against Descartes, Leibniz, and Malebranche, most of the evidence Vico adduces is literary. The first of Vico's literary arguments is presented in the opening, in the chapter titled "*Verum and Factum*." "For the [ancient] Latins," states Vico, "*verum* and *factum* are interchangeable." Vico further adds that *intelligere* 'to read perfectly' or 'to have plain knowledge'

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6. For two classic studies of Vico's philosophy of history, see Benedetto Croce, *The Philosophy of Giambattista Vico*, trans. R. G. Collingwood (New York: Macmillan, 1913); and Isaiah Berlin, *Vico and Herder: Two Studies in the History of Ideas* (London: Hogarth, 1976). Notwithstanding their merits, like Auerbach's reconstruction of Vico, neither of these texts is attuned to Vico's philological method.

7. This emergent and exciting area of scholarship includes Pierre Girard, *Giambattista Vico—Rationalité et politique: Une lecture de la Scienza nuova* (Paris: Presses de l'Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2008); David L. Marshall, *Vico and the Transformation of Rhetoric in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); and Barbara Naddeo, *Vico and Naples: The Urban Origins of Modern Social Theory* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011). Older approaches to Vico as a proto-Marxist are collected in Giorgio Tagliacozzo, ed., *Vico and Marx: Affinities and Contrasts* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities, 1983).

is identical in ancient Latin to *cogitare* 'to think' (*pensare*) and 'to gather' (*andar raccogliendo*) (DA, 14).

Vico proceeds to elaborate the implications of these etymologies: words signify ideas in material form; *legere* 'to read' applies to one who "combines the written elements of which words are composed"; *intelligere* 'to understand' applies to one who combines parts into a conceptual whole. This etymological excursus ends with an attribution of philosophical insight to the "ancient sages of Italy," who left no writing behind and whose thought system Vico has undertaken to reconstruct through language: "It is reasonable that the ancient sages of Italy entertained the following belief about truth: The true is precisely what is made [*verum esse ipsum factum*]." Again, vernacularity is connected, through the preliterate Italians' barbaric language, to the birth of philology.

Early reviewers of *De antiquissima* protested that Vico's argument was based on scanty evidence. One reviewer complained in 1711 that Vico had based his entire theory on a few inconsequential lines from the comedies of Terence in support of his case (MAWI, 145). Arnaldo Momigliano, one of Vico's most attentive critics, observed that "*De antiquissima* was a fiction in the sense that Vico attributed to the ancient Italians a theory of knowledge which was his own."<sup>8</sup> Scholars of Italian linguistics have disputed the technical details of Vico's hypothesis.<sup>9</sup> Interpreted as a historical proposition, the claim that the ancient Italians equated *verum* and *factum* remains unpersuasive.

Vico's genealogy accounted for the severance of two intimately related knowledge forms—reason and imagination—and their attendant disciplines, philosophy and philology. Having discovered a proposition he wished to elaborate, Vico culled a few Latin texts and constructed on that basis a new epistemology. He achieved this not by reconstructing a premodern archive, but through his imagination, his capacity for *fantasia*, and his gift for wonder (*maraviglia*). In advancing an unverifiable proposition, Vico was unfazed by its philological implausibility.<sup>10</sup> Vico's attenuated relationship to historical reconstruction distinguished him from his contemporaries and helped him bridge philology and philosophy.

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8. Arnaldo Momigliano, *Terzo contributo alla storia degli studi classici e del mondo antico* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1966), 162.

9. Robert A. Hall Jr., "G. B. Vico and Linguistic Theory," *Italica* 18, no. 3 (1941): 145–54.

10. See Vico's response to the first criticism of *Antiquissima* (MAWI, 119). Challenged to demonstrate that *factum* and *verum* were equivalent in ancient Latin, Vico cites just two instances from two plays of Terence. In the first, a character admits to an action by saying "*factum*" (*Eunuchus*, 4.707–8); in the second play (*Heautotimorumenos* [Self-tormentor], 3.567), a character acknowledges that an action had transpired through the very same word (*factum*). Vico takes this as philological proof that *verum* and *factum* were indistinguishable in early Latin, but not many philologists would be satisfied by such an argument.

Rather than ask whether Vico was correct to impute *verum esse ipsum factum* to the ancient Italians, my interest here lies with how Vico's philology generated a theory of knowledge and of political agency on newly plebian—and newly democratic—foundations. Vico's errors bear the traces of his method of interpretation. Vico's political philology inculcates a unique understanding of the imagination as an agent in generating political change, as well as democratic legitimacy. While historians working in the tradition of Scaliger and Momigliano seek historical accuracy, a political philologist working in the spirit of Vico must recognize the limitations of historicism when confronted with philological contingency.

### THE CONSOLATIONS OF PHILOLOGY

Vico would be familiar with at least two precedents for the title of his second major contribution to the epistemology of philological knowledge, *De constantia jurisprudentis*, in the masterpiece of another eminent philosophical philologist: Justus Lipsius. Lipsius's treatise on Stoic ethics, *De constantia*, was published in 1584.<sup>11</sup> However, Vico's *De constantia jurisprudentis*—especially its second book on the constancy of philology—could not have differed more drastically from the treatise of the earlier French humanist. Lipsius engaged with Stoic philosophy so as to enable the attainment of tranquility. Vico engaged with ancient Italian philology to contest Cartesian rationalism. Lipsius cited as his motto Seneca's insistence on passive obedience: "Do not perturb what is not in your power to change. We are born in need of guidance: OBEY GOD, FOR THAT IS LIBERTY."<sup>12</sup> Vico's plebian philology reserved its highest praise for those who withhold their consent to society's laws.

By contrast with Lipsius, all of Vico's work after *De antiquissima* was oriented toward the articulation and elaboration of a new political theology. This orientation led Vico to claim that his "new metaphysics discovers the origins of divine and human institutions in the pagan nations" (SN §31). Indeed, in Vichian cosmology, the transformation of the *bestioni*—a term roughly translatable as "feral creatures" but which

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11. Lipsius may have adopted this term for his treatise in order to invoke Boethius's *De consolazione philosophiae* (ca. 525). *Consiantiae* translates the Stoic term *εὐπαθείαι*, roughly, those emotions worthy of cultivation, used in contradistinction to the term *πᾶθη*, or *perturbationes*, which were to be shunned (CD, 14.8; Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* 14.6). Vico only cites Lipsius twice in the *New Science*—once to emend his transcription of a verb found in the Twelve Tables (§955) and then to report on Lipsius's comparison of the ancient Germans in Tacitus to the American Indians (§470). But he would certainly have been aware of Lipsius's treatment of Stoic philosophy.

12. "Nec porturbari, his quoque vitari nostra potestatis non est. In regno nati sumus: DEO PARARE, LIBERTAS EST" (Justus Lipsius, *Traité de la Constance*, ed. Lucien du Bos [Brussels: Murquart, 1874], 217). I have benefited from this bilingual French-Latin edition of Lipsius's treatise and from de Bos's comprehensive introduction (7–106).

Vico crucially resignifies—into (nonhuman) heroes and then plebian humans recapitulates the process through which religion was formed.<sup>13</sup> The best-known result of this political theology is the third edition of the *New Science* (1744), but many important contributions by Vico precede his magnum opus. Perhaps Vico had Lipsius in mind when he argued against Stoicism in the first part of *De constantia jurisprudentis*, titled “De constantia philosophiae.” Four sections are devoted to a discussion and refutation of Stoic premises.<sup>14</sup> But by the time that he reached the penultimate section of *De constantia jurisprudentis*, “On the constancy of philology,” Vico had left Lipsius behind.

Vico sought in this treatise to programmatically define philology for the first time. Here is his definition: “Philology is the study of discourse [*sermonis studium*]. It concerns itself with all matters connected to words [*verba*]. It recounts their history and narrates their origin and progress. It classifies them according to its various ages, so as to grasp their proper and figurative meanings [*translationes*] and their usage [*usus*]. But, since the ideas of things are inscribed in words, philology must first look to the history of things [*rerum Historiam*]” (*DCP*, 29).<sup>15</sup> Vico distinguishes between history and philology: philology engages history to determine words’ meaning and usages, but it regards history as external to itself. “The history of things” is later equated with philosophy. Even while assuming the distinctiveness of *verba* and *res*, Vico’s philology encompasses both. Although Vichian philology is not wholly history in the modern sense, it is *historical* in that it is concerned with the things (*res*) of this world. Vico’s preoccupation by the things of the world makes philology more philosophically consequential and more politically salient than a mere collation of words.<sup>16</sup>

Alongside his merger of philosophy and philology and his infusion of historical inquiry with the imagination, knowledge in Vico’s account advances the good of the

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13. In addition to the studies cited *passim*, for scholarship specifically on Vico’s resignification of *bestioni*, see Nicola Perullo, *Bestie e bestioni: Il problema dell’animale in Vico* (Naples: Guida, 2002); and Stefano Velotti, *Sapienti e bestioni: Saggio sull’ignoranza, il sapere e la poesia in Giambattista Vico* (Parma: Pratiche, 1995).

14. “Ut probanda Dogmata Metaphysica Stoicorum?,” “De Fato dogma qua acceptione falsum” (both chap. 6); “Impia Stoicorum superbia” (chap. 10); and “Quae Stoicorum moralia dogmata Christianis consentanae” (chap. 13).

15. The nearly contemporary *Programma de philologia subsidio studii theologicis vehementer utili ac necessario* (Braunschweig: Litteris Keitelianis, 1746), 3, also defines philology by conjoining the study of discourse to history: “Philologiae nomen, quod . . . sermonis stadium significant . . . apud illos philologi dicerentur historiarum ac variae eruditionis studiosi” (Philology is a noun signifying the study of discourse . . . those who study history and various erudite discourses are called philologists).

16. For a perceptive reading of Vico’s *res/verba* distinction, see Michael Mooney, “The Primacy of Language in Vico,” *Social Research* 43, no. 3 (1976): 588–89.

commonwealth. Philology's aims, Vico argues, are unambiguously political and necessary for the republic's welfare (*DCP*, 28). For Vico philology is both the founding science of the humanities and the epistemic foundation of polities. "Philologists follow their calling," he writes, "when they write commentaries on commonwealths, the customs, laws, institutions, branches of learning, and artifacts of nations and peoples." Philologists give evidence concerning ancient times they explicate the rhetoric of orators, philosophers, even historians, and especially poets. When they practice this vocation, "the commonwealth receives great benefit [*maximam capit utilitatem*]: it can interpret the ancient language of its laws and religion" (29). These reflections intimate correspondences Vico later elaborated in the *New Science*, namely, that philology is to authority what philosophy is to reason.<sup>17</sup> Vico's pronounced republican tendencies and his conviction that the only worthwhile knowledge serves the good of the commonwealth and helps people to bridge their "monstrous isolation" (*SN* §1106) set him apart here and elsewhere from his contemporaries.

### VICO, AUGUSTINE, VARRO

For all its seeming invisibility, Augustine's *De civitate dei* may well be the most ubiquitously present among the many works that influenced the *New Science*. Much of Vico's material, particularly his reliance on Varro's *Antiquities of Things Divine and Human* (*Antiquitates rerum humanarum et divinarum*), which is extant only in fragments, derives from this source. At the same time, Augustine, who preserved much of Varro's most important work, functions as a negative and silent weight against whom Vico grounds his argument. Vico does not openly position himself in opposition to Augustine; a passionately pious Christian and deep believer in divine providence, Vico may have been oblivious to his conceptual distance from late antiquity's most influential exegete. But no reader of *The City of God* can engage the *New Science* without perceiving the reversal Vico effected with respect to Augustine's conceptual framework. Long before Vico, philosophers had challenged Augustine's epistemology, but they rarely if ever did so from within a religious framework. Instead of offering a new god to replace Augustinian hermeneutics, Vico located his writings squarely within Christian revelation, while evoking a pre-Augustinian natural entelechy derived from Varronian antiquarianism.

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17. "Philosophia ferat constatum rationis; tentemus, ut Philologia fermet constantiam auctoritatis, qua via, diximus, auctoritatem partem esse rationis" (Philosophy is guided by the principle of reason; philology is guided by the principle of authority. From this, we conclude that authority is part of reason) (*DCP*, 28).

More important for philology's conceptual history than Vico's engagement with Augustine is his reintroduction of Varro to the philological horizon. More even than for philologists such as Scaliger, who preceded him, Varro's lost *Antiquitates* meant more to Vico than a source of information concerning ancient Rome. As the Varro of the eighteenth century and an antiquarian within an anti-antiquarian modernity, Vico called his Latin predecessor "the most learned of the ancients [*antiquitatis doctissimus*]" (DCP, 199; SN §52). For Vico, anyone who had contributed to making the past alive in the present was ipso facto an antiquarian. An ancient discipline served as the epistemic foundations for Vico's modern philological imagination.

Vico stakes out an epistemic terrain for plebian philology when he argues that the myths generated by the savages (*bestioni*) were grounded in empirical reality.<sup>18</sup> The very same myths that Vico incorporated into his philology had invited Augustine's opprobrium when he was confronted with Varro's endorsement of myths as necessary for the good of the commonwealth. Vico argued that stories concerning the acts of pagan gods reflected actual events and were not just the illusory mental projections of uncomprehending heathens. In Vico, superstition is given a second life within a Varronian civil theology that, though mediated by Augustine, sharply contrasts with the latter's taxonomy. Given his profound attachment to the Catholic faith, Vico was not eager to emphasize the contrasts between his ontology of the fabulous and that of Augustine, Christianity's most important post-Pauline exegete. However, it cannot be denied that a close reading of *De civitate dei* in relation to the *New Science* and in relation to the partial scholarly reconstruction of Varro's *Antiquitates* yields two radically irreconcilable points of view.

Briefly reconstructing Augustine's rejection of Varronian hermeneutics will clarify how Vico reversed the antiquarian-historian relation by offering the profoundly new, and no less profoundly ancient, genealogy of the gods that is the *New Science*. Augustine understood myth (*μυθος*, which he translated as *fabula*) to be inconsistent with the Christian revelation that postulated absolute and certain knowledge. As Momigliano perspicaciously observed, Roman and Christian metaphysics were divided according to the following principle: the first favored authority as the arbiter of values; the second favored revelation.<sup>19</sup> Just as Roman antiquarians such as Varro and Cicero took little interest in revelations that could not be grounded in authority (and which

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18. An extended analysis of this argument is offered in Joseph Mali, "The Revision of Mythology," in *The Rehabilitation of Myth: Vico's "New Science"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 136–209.

19. For an excellent discussion of Cicero's relation to religious belief, see Arnaldo Momigliano, "The Theological Efforts of the Roman Upper Classes in the First Century B.C.," *Classical Philology* 79, no. 3 (1984): 199–211, esp. n. 9.

therefore, as Vico would have noted, could not serve the commonwealth), so early Christians were drawn to a religion that seemed to offer an alternative to authority in the form of revelation.

Varro and Cicero did not need to believe in the gods in order to recognize their political efficacy.<sup>20</sup> From the vantage point of the commonwealth, what mattered was the contribution of the idea of the gods to the good of the republic. Varro and Cicero were happy to leave demonstrations and refutations of the existence of the gods to the philosophers. This is why Varro made the (for Augustine) scandalous suggestion that “it is expedient in a commonwealth for brave men to believe, though it be a fiction, that they are descended from the gods.”<sup>21</sup> For Augustine, the political good was subordinate to religion’s doctrines. Before asking whether the gods served the good of the commonwealth, it was necessary to consider whether their existence could be reconciled with Christian revelation. If the existence of the gods proved incompatible with the Christian revelation, then the fabulous genealogies through which Varro and others had expounded on the good of the commonwealth were emptied of any conceptual value for Augustine. With respect to their rejection of the imagination as an arbiter of truth, and of popular belief in favor of autonomous reason, abstracted from any social context, Augustine seemed to Vico to anticipate Descartes. This conceptual alliance placed both thinkers in opposition to Vico’s own vision for a just and poetically ontologized world.

Augustine did not take into consideration in his critique of Cicero’s and Varro’s political theology the distance between their concepts of truth and his own. A claim regarding the falsity of the gods from a Christian perspective is epistemically distinct from a claim regarding their falsity from the point of view of Roman law. When myths have been accepted as real, as they had been by Varro, then imagination becomes a distinctly political act. Sensing that Augustinian epistemology weakened the political power of the imagination, Vico argued for a return to a pre-Augustinian metaphysics that accepted, not that the gods were alive in the present, but that they had *once* roamed the earth. The existence of the gods in Varro’s sense was conceptually prior to the political theory that grounded Vico’s secular state. Vico’s recognition of radical temporal difference has led scholars and theorists to regard Vico as a predecessor to

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20. According to Vico, Cicero “spoke as an expert in antiquities” (SN §777). Vico’s description of Cicero supports Elizabeth Rawson’s argument (*Intellectual Life in the Late Roman Republic* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985]) that “Cicero stood closer to the tradition of antiquarianism than to that of historiography proper” (33).

21. Augustine, *City of God*, trans. G. E. McCracken (Cambridge, MA: Loeb Classical Library, 1957), 1:277.

historicism.<sup>22</sup> Meanwhile, Vico's unique grasp of the role of the imagination in bringing about political change has gone underappreciated.

Vico reversed Augustinian ontology through his political genealogy of poetic knowledge. He maintained that Homer received the ancient myths "in a corrupt and indecorous form" (SN §808). "All these myths," Vico asserted, "were initially true stories which, gradually altered and corrupted, reached the age of Homer." Characteristically, Vico's proof was language itself, viewed along a continuum of temporal difference. "The first heroic age invented myths as true narratives," he wrote, "which is the primary and proper meaning of the Greek word *mythos*. The second age altered and corrupted these myths; and the third and final age, Homer's age, received them in this corrupt form" (§808). Vico's wording strongly recalls Augustine's citations from Cicero in the final books of *The City of God*. Cicero too had suggested that during the age of Homer humans believed in the gods. The transition from the age of heroes to the age of men entailed a process of secularization. As Cicero noted concerning the era of Romulus (eighth century BCE), the founder of Rome: "other men who are said to have become gods lived in less educated ages, when there was a greater propensity for fabrication [*fingendi*], and when the uneducated [*minus eruditus*] were easily persuaded to believe anything."<sup>23</sup>

Vico's democratic commitment to plebian epistemology exceeded that of Cicero. Whereas the Roman statesman had expressed surprise that anyone could deify the founder of Rome, Vico did not despise the epistemologies Cicero deemed primitive and vulgar. The loss of Varro's *Antiquitates* makes any reconstruction of his views necessarily speculative, and we can only guess what Varro believed himself to be doing on the basis of the citations given by Augustine, his opponent.<sup>24</sup> But we do know what Vico read, and we know that his access to Varro, was, in terms of his sources, as limited as our own. Fragmented and based on anti-Varronian polemics, this archive was transmitted by scholars who were hostile to the very texts they transmitted. We know enough to conclude that Vico the early modern philologist of plebian politics joined forces with Varro, the greatest antiquarian of antiquity, to pioneer a political epistemology that neither Augustine nor Cicero could have foreseen.<sup>25</sup>

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22. See n. 6 above, as well as R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (1946; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 63–71.

23. Augustine, *City of God* 7.194 (= 22.6).

24. For an important reconstruction, see Joseph McAlhany, "Language, Truth, and Illogic in the Writings of Varro" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2003).

25. A strong case has been made, on the basis of his writings on agriculture and household management, for the political conservatism of Varro's thought. Werner Jaeger, among others, presents Varro as a "reactionary" (*The Theology of the Early Greek Philosophers* [Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood,

The citational record is suggestive. Vico twice lamented the loss of the *Antiquitates* in his *New Science*. Nowhere did Vico praise Augustine, although every use he made of Varro points directly to Augustine's mediation. Vico argued that myths have empirical foundations. Those who believed in myths, and who, like the composite Homer, believed they were composing poetry under the tutelage of the gods, were not practicing deceit. Myths, like poetry, were not merely true but also necessary, in the basic epistemological sense that they were conceptually prior to all other ways of knowing. David Marshall accounts for this well when he writes that, for Vico, poetry "is the antithesis of decorative choice. It is the faculty that permits human beings to build concepts."<sup>26</sup> At the same time, Vico, always attuned to radical temporal difference, limited the temporal scope of his claims. His insistence that myths possessed historical and poetical veracity in the past did not bind him to insist on their empirical dimensions in the present. Vico's concept of historical change is temporally diverse though not historicist. Instead of reviving the past for its own sake, Vico sought to discover and render ancient humanity's primordial sense of wonder (*maraviglia*), which encompassed nonliterate, and even prelinguistic, forms of knowledge. The *New Science*, notes Giuseppe Mazzotta, "features wonder as the category under which the poetic and the religious belong," for it is "the state that ruptures the uniformity of an undifferentiated world."<sup>27</sup> Vico made a case for an unfalsifiable epistemology that was not inconsequential by virtue of its unfalsifiability. Who is to say that the gods did not factually exist in the past?, he asked. Vico perceived that facts are as much articles of faith as are the constructs of the imagination.

Vico's populist epistemology of the imagination brings us to the locus classicus of Vichian political philology: his famous attempt to combine two forms of knowledge, the philosophical and the philological, within a single system. We have witnessed Vico's initial incorporation of *res* and *verba* into a method of inquiry that incorporates both reason and authority in *De constantia philologia*. In that earlier articulation, philosophy remained peripheral to Vico's philological endeavor. Only in the entirely revised third edition of the *New Science* (1744) were philology and philosophy made

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1980], 3; also see Howard Weinbrot, *Menippean Satire Reconsidered: From Antiquity to the Eighteenth Century* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005], 29–39). These presentations concentrate on Varro's personal sentiments rather than the broad themes of his writings. The political implications of Varro's civil theology have not been subjected to philosophical analysis.

26. Marshall, *Vico and the Transformation of Rhetoric*, 208. For the purposes of this discussion, I have assumed the relative identity of poetic and philological knowledge; the difference between the terms, which are used interchangeably at times, is that poetry enables and generates philological knowledge, which in turn makes poetry into its object of inquiry.

27. Giuseppe Mazzotta, *The New Map of the World: The Poetic Philosophy of Giambattista Vico* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 109.

equivalent and necessary to each other. The best-known formulation of this equivalence is an influential passage that defines philology in relation to philosophy before lamenting the failure of both disciplines to engage each other:

Philosophy contemplates reason [*ragioni*], from which comes the science of truth [*la scienza del vero*]. Philology submits to the authority of human will, from which comes knowledge of what is certain [*la coscienza del certo*].

The second half of this axiom defines as philologists all grammarians, historians, and critics occupied with peoples' languages and deeds, their domestic customs and laws, their foreign wars, peaces, pacts, and travels and commerce.

This axiom also demonstrates how the philosophers and the philologists have failed each other. The philosophers have failed to use the philologists' authority to certify their reasoning, just as the philologists have failed to employ the reasoning of the philosophers to verify their authorities. Had they not made this mistake, they would have done more good for our republics, and would have anticipated my New Science. (SN §138–40).

It took Vico twenty years of intense mental labor to arrive at this articulation. Vico does not specify which philosophers he had in mind when he criticized their failure to heed philology's authority, but we need not look far. The natural law theorists Grotius, Selden, and Pufendorf continually come under attack in the *New Science* (e.g., §§310, 313, 318) for their elitist and antiphilological assumptions concerning the role of reason in human history. Like his peers in the field of natural law, Vico too aimed to found a science based on rational inquiry. He differed from natural rights theorists in that he did not see rational inquiry as the only or even the ideal mode through which humans accessed truth. Further, Vico was acutely aware of the political implications of privileging reason, a mode of thought cultivated by the ruling elite and beyond the reach of those they ruled, as the superior knowledge form, and of accepting the concomitant downgrading of wonder that the rationalist hierarchy entailed. The epistemic delegitimation of poetic knowledge entailed the political disenfranchisement of the plebeians. Philology provided Vico with a democratic politics that philosophy, occupying the endpoint of the authority-reason continuum, could not offer.

Vico states in his autobiography that the idea of combining philosophy with philology first occurred to him while reading Grotius's *Laws of War and Peace* (1625).<sup>28</sup> He was fascinated by the Dutch jurist's combination of legal reasoning with textual

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28. *Opere di Giambattista Vico*, ed. Francesco Saverio Pomodoro (Naples: Stamperia de Classici Latini, 1858), 1:25 (= AGV, 154).

analysis based on the philological methods he learned from his teacher Joseph Justus Scaliger, while the latter was resident in Leiden. Vico also learned much about reason in relation to authority from Bacon, whose presence is particularly palpable in the first edition of his *New Science*, and from Hobbes, whose civil philosophy served as a model against which Vico constructed his Varronian civil theology. And yet the precise formulation that Vico gave to the *bestioni's* philosophical-philological way of knowing, as savages become heroes, heroes become human, and humans become the Roman plebs, exceeds his predecessors.<sup>29</sup>

A century prior to Vico, Thomas Hobbes referred to the plebeians in derogatory terms when he wrote in the *Leviathan* (1651) that the “Prayers and Thanksgiving” due to God should be offered “in Words and Phrases, not sudden, nor light, nor Plebeian.”<sup>30</sup> Although an offhand statement, made without reference to Roman history, this early extrapolation of the original meaning of the term onto a cotemporary post-Westphalian context is revealing. By contrast with the dominant trend of post-Westphalian political and legal theory, Vico chose to vest the authority for the integrity of his polity in the very social demographic that his counterparts despised. In contrast to the legal philosophers who concentrated their efforts in justifying the existing social order, and in projecting that order back onto antiquity, and the philologists, who, while interested in historical difference, perceived the ruling elites as the rightful guardians of language, Vico used philology to expose the pretensions of the philosophers. In doing so, he politicized both disciplines irrevocably.

### PLEBIAN PHILOLOGY'S POLITICS

The relation between philology and philosophy in Vico's method has been the subject of this investigation so far. It has been shown that the philological imagination possessed for Vico a unique capacity to mediate between human and divine knowledge. Whereas reason secularizes, philology reverses the secularization process; it builds on the axiom *verum esse ipsum factum*, truth neither wholly rational nor blind to the limitations of authority. Because its point of departure is that we can only know that which we create, Vico's epistemology is inherently contingent and well suited to both generate and question authority. In its creativity, philological knowledge contests the Cartesian reduction that, in Vico's view, deprives human beings of the freedom to create their pasts, as well as their futures.

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29. For the sequence *bestioni* ⇒ heroes ⇒ human I follow Anthony Grafton, *Bring Out Your Dead: The Past as Revelation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 266.

30. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan: With Selected Variants from the Latin Edition of 1668*, ed. Edwin Curley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), 241.

Who practices this kind of philology? Who generates this kind of poetry? Vico did not hold that all peoples were poetic or philological in equal degrees. Rather, he argued that those with greatest access to vernacular forms of expression were the most adept at expressing themselves poetically, and hence the rightful inheritors of plebian philology. For Vico, early Rome exemplified this paradigm through the *bestioni*, wild beasts who “imagined the heavens as a great living body” (SN §377). While *bestioni* primarily signifies a class of animals, Vico used the term with reference to the prototypes of the Roman plebeians. Vico identified three aspects of the *bestioni*'s philology according: first, a generalized poetic impulse, which, during the earliest period in human history, was not confined to a single class of individuals but was held in common by everyone; second, common sense (*sensus communis*), which equalizes humans and which effects historical change; third, vernacular knowledge, the linguistic storehouse of humanity's poetic wisdom. Only much later did vernacular knowledge become esoteric wisdom accessible only to the philosophers. The third aspect of the *bestioni*'s philology is evident as early as Vico's first treatise on the metaphysics of linguistic knowledge, *De antiquissima*.

Vico's rendering of the form and content of the *bestioni*'s philology is clear; more opaque is how to make this prehistorical demographic, the *bestioni*, legible in historical terms. While this is a contested area of scholarship, my view is that Vico's political philology links the prehistorical *bestioni* to the plebs of Roman antiquity. While I this argument has been made before in general terms, scholars who have intimated this link have not fully teased out its implications for democratic political theory or linked the politics that emergences from Vico's philology to his aesthetic agenda.<sup>31</sup> To adequately grasp the link between democratic politics and plebian philology, it is necessary to look beyond Vico's immediate object of inquiry—the knowledge of classical antiquity in general and specifically the historical development of Roman law—and to take account of his system as a whole. Looking forward in history (and somewhat, though not entirely, anachronistically), the *bestioni* can further be linked to the masses of industrial modernity, whom Marx sought to liberate in his Vichian critiques of the political economy.<sup>32</sup> Such congruencies are implied in Vico's claim that “the plebeians [*plebei*] were considered to be of bestial origin [*origine bestiale*], and hence people with no gods . . . so that they were granted only the benefits of natural liberty” (SN §414).

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31. Girard, Mali, Marshall, Momigliano, Naddeo, and Grafton have all made significant contributions in this regard; my point is that they have all tended to emphasize either Vico's politics (or, relatedly, his relationship to history) at the expense of his or his aesthetics at the expense of his politics and that the concept of plebian philology enables us to overcome this polarity.

32. Marx directly references Vico in *Das Kapital*, in *Karl Marx/Friedrich Engels Werke*, 44 vols. (Berlin: Dietz, 1956–2018), 23:393.

That the plebeians lack gods does not mean for Vico that they are remote from the sacred. Rather the plebeians' sacred is terrestrial; it is creaturely in the profound sense of being mortal. The plebeians' nontranscendent object of worship is a non-Augustinian Varronian civil theology. In terms of Vichian political philology, it would seem that the very qualities the plebs lack when compared to the aristocracy are the grounds of their autonomy, their wisdom, and their political agency.

That the plebs are considered to descend from the *bestioni*—that they are, in the most literal and nonderogatory sense, barbarians—empowers them to change the dominant political structure from aristocracy to democracy once they understand the true meaning of Virgil's dictum "Jupiter is the same for everyone" (*Iupiter omnibus aequus*; SN §415). Activating his impressive capacity for politically inflected philological exegesis, Vico notes that later scholars came to read Virgil's appeal to human equality in evolutionary terms, and concluded that "all minds are initially equal, but differences in their physical constitution and civil education make them different" (§415). In Vico's reading, this interpretation of Virgil's dictum is constrained by class privilege and fails to grasp the meaning of the words in their original context. The elitist interpretation of "*Iupiter omnibus aequus*" that was normative in Vico's day represented a failure of the philological and political imagination to engage with each other, as well as with the world.<sup>33</sup> To read the dictum "Jupiter is the same for everyone" within the horizon of its original social, political, metaphysical, and epistemic contexts means adopting the hermeneutic of plebian philology and rejecting the falsifications inculcated by the *eroi* (literally, "heroes," a category that Vico also radically, and pejoratively, resignifies) and subsequently canonized by the aristocracy.

The plebeians' civil theology is appropriately guided by a "sage of vulgar wisdom [*sapiente di sapienza volgare*]" who expressed himself in poetic archetypes long before the more rational but less poetic philosophies of Plato and Aristotle entered the world. For the plebs of the Hellenic world, this sage was the same Solon who "urged the plebeians to reflect on themselves and to conclude that they were equal to the nobles in their human nature [*d'ugual natura umana co' nobili*], and consequently should be equal in civil rights [*civil diritto*]" (SN §414). Indeed, the plebs' lack of divine origins (linked to their descent from the *bestioni*) legitimates their claims to political representation, which for Vico is grounded in the human subject. Vico's interest in the vernac-

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33. As Vico indicates, the phrase *Iupiter omnibus aequus* is foundational for his political philology. Paraphrasing Tasso, Vico states that the teaching that "Jupiter was equal to all" is the "civil history [*storia civile*]" of the Virgilian expression (§415). See Fausto Nicolini, *Commento storico alla seconda Scienza nuova* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1950), 2:162.

ular foundations of public life is evident in his assertion that the “Solon principle”—the claim that every populist government is ruled by a sage who represents the collective wisdom of the masses and who contests the knowledges propagated by the non-vernacular elite—applies to ancient Rome and Egypt as well as to ancient Greece (§§415–16). For example, Vico presents Hermes Trismegistus as the Egyptian counterpart to Solon (§416).<sup>34</sup>

While recognizing Vico’s suggestive parallel between the *bestioni* and the plebs, Joseph Mali carries this analogy a step further. Mali notes that Vico’s *bestioni* correspond to a demographic that was historically more proximate to Vico than were the plebs of antiquity. The *bestioni* and, through their mediation, the plebs can be mapped onto the class divisions of eighteenth-century Naples. Mali suggests that Vico’s “depiction of the Roman *eroi* and *bestioni* was modeled, implicitly at least, on their Neapolitan counterparts, the *nobili* and the *lazzaroni*.”<sup>35</sup> Indeed, in an early lecture on rhetoric Vico himself licensed such analogies when he enjoined the would-be jurist to “draw a parallel between the Roman Empire and the monarchic system of our age, in order to investigate whether the same beneficial effects spring from both of them.”<sup>36</sup> By linking the *bestioni* of prehistory to the plebes of antiquity and to the *lazzaroni* of his era, Vico was able to ground his philology in a distinctly democratic political philosophy.

Vico’s plebian philology emerges most strikingly in his discussions of the origins of the Twelve Tables (ca. fifth century BCE), the earliest (and only partly extant) written articulation of Roman jurisprudence.<sup>37</sup> Vico’s achievements in this area have been studied extensively.<sup>38</sup> While his influence seems marginal to legal philosophy in the present, Vico’s long-term impact on the development of European law, not least his discovery of the origins of written Roman law in the customs of the Roman plebs is reflected in a range of sources, from Savigny onward.<sup>39</sup> One line of inquiry that has

34. For a perspective on Hermes Trismegistus grounded in Arabic sources, see Kevin Bladel, *The Arabic Hermes: From Pagan Sage to Prophet of Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). This work compliments Vico’s pioneering provincialization of Europe.

35. Mali, *Rehabilitation of Myth*, 237.

36. *De nostri temporis studiorum ratione* (1709) in *J. B. Vici Opera Latini*, ed. Joseph Ferrari (Milan: Società tipografica de’ classici italiani, 1835), 2:33.

37. For a critical edition of this text, see *Duodecim tabulae*, ed. Eric Herbert Warmington (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979).

38. For a classic account, see Fisch, “Vico on Roman Law,” 62–88.

39. Friedrich von Savigny, the greatest German jurist of the nineteenth century, recognized Vico as his predecessor in historical jurisprudence and followed his example in pursuing the reconstruction of ancient Roman law through vernacular philology. Savigny was responsible for the German translation of Vico’s *De uno universi iuris* (the text that included *De constantia philologiae*) by K. H. Müller (Fisch and Bergin, “Introduction,” in *AGV*, 70). For a later application of Vichian philosophy to comparative

not been fully pursued in the context of Vichian plebian philology is the relation between legal change and democratic legitimacy. Vico stands out among his contemporaries for his recognition of the political salience of poetic knowledge (as against Cartesian dualism), for his insight into the radical potential of antiquarianism (as against Bacon and other forward-looking theorists of scientific knowledge), and for his plebian political orientation (as against the early modern focus on the rights of kings and, subsequently, of nations). As a result of these innovations, Vico's reception history can be narrated largely in terms of the varying responses to his "reinvention of rhetoric."<sup>40</sup>

Beyond these achievements, and in the tradition of Dante's *De vulgari eloquentia* (ca. 1302), Vico was the first European exegete of an explicitly vernacular philology that addressed itself to a history that was explicitly not the history of Europe and the metropole.<sup>41</sup> As a result of his vernacular orientation, which views world history from below, Vico's range is genuinely global, even when he focuses heavily on Greco-Roman antiquity. Vico's main historical actors are the Romans, but whereas before and even long after Vico, scholars of antiquity focused on the educated elite as the sole engine driving historical change, Vico examines the origins of popular sovereignty through the figure of the *bestioni*. Whereas previous authors focused on the *eroi* (the nobility) as the bearers of the only conceivable history worth narrating, Vico concentrates on both the *eroi* and the *bestioni*, a label he uses interchangeably with the plebs (*i plebei*). In fact, Vico only takes an interest in the *eroi* to the extent that this elite demographic sheds light on the vernacular imagination.

### ROMAN LAW AND THE PLEBS

Among the contemporary impediments to understanding Vico is his immense erudition. The sources of Vico's knowledge derive largely from archives that have come to be seen as irrelevant to modern intellectual inquiry. It is difficult to recover the sense of urgency that attends Vico's polemic against standard accounts of the genesis of Roman law in Livy, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Pomponius, Pliny the Elder, Cicero, and pseudo-Heraclitus. Yet, it has been claimed even in recent decades that Vico's reading of Roman

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jurisprudence, see M. Chassan's remarkable and unjustly neglected *Essai de la Symbolique du Droit: Sur la poésie du droit primitive* (Paris: Videcoq fils aîné, 1847). As the title suggests, this work is as indebted to Creuzer's *Symbolik* (1801) as it is to Vico.

40. David Marshall, "The Current State of Vico Scholarship," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 72, no. 1 (2011): 141. For meticulous documentation of Vico's relation to the rhetorical traditions of his past and present, see Michael Mooney, *Vico in the Tradition of Rhetoric* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 3–23.

41. The contribution of Vico's political theory to anticolonial thought is excavated in Timothy Brennan, *Borrowed Light: Vico, Hegel and the Colonies* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014).

legal history has “no equal in originality or audacity.”<sup>42</sup> The difficulty lies in reconstructing what Vico intended—politically, philosophically, and poetically—by his revolutionary genealogy of the Twelve Tables.

Before Vico, a long and revered historical tradition traced the genesis of Roman law to the Greeks.<sup>43</sup> Cicero, Dionysus Halicarnassus, and Livy all concurred in the basic details. In the year 245 CE (according to the Roman calendar), the monarchy was overthrown. In the ensuing chaos, the plebeians pushed for increased transparency in the law. They demanded a written document that would clearly specify what was permitted and what was forbidden and that would outline the punishment for infractions. The laws by which these plebeians lived—and according to which they could be executed or imprisoned—had until then been shrouded in mystery, doubtlessly in order to consolidate the ruling class’s power. After nearly fifty years of internecine struggle, the patricians finally yielded and agreed to provide a written law to which they as well as the plebs would be subject.

A problem remained. On what basis could such a law be formulated, given that there was no precedent for written law in Roman history? According to Dionysus Halicarnassus and Livy, the patrician assembly dispatched a deputation to Athens, a city that famed for the integrity of its laws due to Solon’s democratic code.<sup>44</sup> Three years later, the deputation returned. Ten men (the Decemvirs) were appointed to produce a synthesis of Greek laws and Roman customs. These ten laws were then erected in the Forum, in the center of Rome, for all to see, and to remind those who were literate of their accountability to a general jurisprudential code that was not specific to their rank or class. Two more tables were added in the following year, hence the name by which the Twelve Tables (*Duodecim Tabulae*) came to be known.

As with Varro’s *Antiquitates*, Vico’s other major source for the reconstruction of antiquity, the Twelve Tables have reached us only in fragments. There has been much debate in modern scholarship concerning their original content as well as the historical process through which these laws were codified. Vico’s name hardly takes center stage in these debates, which have focused more on the interpretation of specific empirical

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42. Fisch, “Vico on Roman Law,” 88.

43. This summary is informed by Patrick H. Hutton, “The Problem of Oral Tradition in Vico’s Historical Scholarship,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 53, no. 1 (1992): 10–23. There is of course a rich literature on this topic in classical studies, among which the most relevant are Andrew Lintott, *The Constitution of the Roman Republic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); and Callie Williamson, *The Laws of the Roman People: Public Law in the Expansion and Decline of the Roman Republic* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010).

44. For a historical discussion of Solon’s code, see Mogens Herman Hansen, *The Athenian Democracy in the Age of Demosthenes: Structure, Principles, and Ideology* (Oklahoma City: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), 27–54.

data than on their epistemological or political implications. Vico scholars however concur in asserting that Vico was the first to suggest that the story that has reached us from Dionysus Halicarnassus and Livy was based on a lie, which he referred to as “the conceit of scholars” (*SN* §§124, 127, 284, 330). Only by recognizing the political stakes of Vico’s philological argument concerning the genesis of Roman law can we accurately trace the confluence of forces that converge in his plebian philology.

Vico’s rejection of the Greek origin theory has been described as an a priori dismissal required by his philosophical agenda, and as therefore inadequate from a scholarly point of view.<sup>45</sup> It is true that Vico made many mistakes in his account. He confused Dionysus of Halicarnassus with Longinus, did not adequately check his references, and frequently misquoted his sources. Viewed rigidly, Vico’s account seems simultaneously brilliant and technically flawed. The questions raised by Vico with respect to the origin and codification of the Twelve Tables had to wait, so runs this argument, until the more rigorous research of Barthold Georg Niebuhr and Pierre-Nicholas Bonamy in subsequent centuries to bear their richest fruit.

Such critiques offer an important context for assessing the scholarly limitations of Vico’s plebian philology. And yet the distinctiveness of plebian philology (embodied in the dictum “*verum esse ipsum factum*”) lies in its contestation of the division between a priori and a posteriori knowledge. There is one truth, Vico teaches, that humans can know, one truth alone. That one truth consists of everything humans have made. This epistemological principle applies even to God, with the necessary qualification that God is unbegotten and therefore knows, in a way humans can never know, the nature of the universe. The *verum-factum* principle trumps the quest for certain knowledge outside an a priori structure. There may or may not be a “pre” to *verum-factum*, but neither our knowledge, nor even God’s knowledge, can transcend the *verum-factum* divide.<sup>46</sup>

The Vichian a priori is language, the wisdom of the ancient Italians (as in *De antiquissima*), which in the *New Science* morphs into a full-scale politics of plebian philology. Vico’s rejection of the Greek origin thesis for the Twelve Tablets converges well with his philosophy of history, specifically with his conviction that all nations

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45. See Michael Steinberg, “The Twelve Tables and Their Origins: An Eighteenth-Century Debate,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 43, no. 3 (1982): 384–96.

46. These remarks are informed by Sheldon Pollock’s distinction between ultimate truth (*paramartha sat*) and pragmatic truth (*vyavaharika sat*) in Indian philosophy, which he explicitly links to Vico’s *verum/certum* distinction in “Future Philology? The Fate of a Soft Science in a Hard World,” *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 4 (2009): 950.

(except the Hebrews) develop through parallel trajectories and that the Romans could not have borrowed their law from the Greeks because the Romans already had their own law, buried palimpsest-like in the customs of the *bestioni*. But such a reading, which is already accepted by scholars, obscures the fact that Vico rejects historical determinism. Nor does he apply principles in the abstract. For Vico, abstraction is the enemy of knowledge; Marshall aptly describe it as “an emaciation of language that robs [language] of its metaphorical capacity to denote particular phenomena with words that denote things sharing particular likenesses with those phenomena.”<sup>47</sup> Marshall also offers the salient observation that “*The Scienza nuova’s* almost complete abstention from an abstract analytical vocabulary derives from this attitude toward language and requires readers to place themselves in the position of poets as they reconstitute the text for themselves.”<sup>48</sup> The concept of political agency entailed in plebian philology extends beyond the text itself.

From the point of view of Vichian epistemology, the a priori has no conceptual value. There is no “before” and “after” to the attainment of certainty. Vico would of course insist that this insight describes knowledge generally. Neither *verum* nor *certum* can escape being shaped by the contingent conditions under which our knowledge is generated (*factum ipse esse verum*). The epistemological claim that we know what we make generates the ontological insight that, over the course of such knowledge, which always takes place through language, we become what we already are. In the process of becoming, we create our knowledge. In other words, we create ourselves. Herein lies the meaning and substance of freedom from the point of view of plebian philology.

All forms of Vichian knowing are functions of the *factum ipse esse verum* principle. To the extent that knowledge is necessarily hierarchical and that different methodologies generate different results, the polarity between truth and falsity, and facticity versus the imagination, invalidates itself. Vico’s concept of political agency relies on an active imagination that is an agent of creation in that which it sees. Democracy for Vico is at once epistemic and political. Built on the poetic perception of plebeians, it requires their continuing participation in the political activity commonwealth, including especially in the drafting and interpretation of the laws to which everyone is subject. Understood in these terms, plebian philology is equally a political and an epistemic project. It is political because it cannot be realized without plebian agency, and it is epistemic because this agency is necessarily expressed in a specific, poetic, vernacular form.

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47. Marshall, *Vico and the Transformation of Rhetoric*, 196.

48. *Ibid.*

**“KNOW THYSELF” AS AN INJUNCTION  
TO POLITICAL ACTION**

Vico’s plebian philology reveals itself most strikingly in the numerous allusions to Solon that permeate the *New Science*. Two crucial passages will suffice here. Vico states in book 2 (“On Poetic Wisdom”) that Solon was a sage of popular wisdom who led the Greeks from aristocracy to democracy. We know from Diogenes Laertius that Solon corresponded with the Athenian tyrant Peisistratos, also known to history as the first editor of the Homeric epics, on the subject of tyranny, freedom, and democracy.<sup>49</sup> According to Diogenes Laertius, whom Vico elsewhere cites as his source for his knowledge of Roman law, Solon possessed astonishing insight, rare among statesmen past and present, into the sources of oppression and inequality, and the means for overcoming injustice. When Solon was asked how men could be deterred from committing injustice, he replied that the best deterrent was a society, and a social conscience, that ensured that “those who are not injured feel as much indignation as those who are.”<sup>50</sup>

On Vico’s reconstruction, Solon understood that justice could never be the property of a single polity and least of all a single individual. Only when those who are not oppressed are outraged by the oppression of others could democratic politics be achieved. Such was Vico’s reading of Solon; it was at once radically historical, inasmuch as it drew its inspiration from the past, and radically anachronistic, inasmuch as it mined the past for material relevant to the political present. Vico’s account of the transition from plebeian popular wisdom to democratic philosophy suggests that the fullest concept of democracy before modernity was theorized—in vernacular language and in poetic terms—not by Plato and Aristotle but rather by the plebs and Solon, their populist spokesman. Solon—and here Vico is emphatic—was not a philosopher. He was a sage, an exponent of popular wisdom (*sapienza volgare*; SN §414), held in common by all from the first age of humanity. Vico’s discussion of Solon is arguably the most important and certainly the most democratically informed elaboration of “common sense” before Gramsci.<sup>51</sup> Witness Vico’s application of Solon’s example to Roman history:

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49. Peisistratos’s reputation as the first editor of Homer is probably apocryphal. Rudolf Pfeiffer argues that the text was not fully redacted until the Alexandrian grammarians; see *History of Classical Scholarship from the Beginnings to the End of the Hellenistic Age* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968), 6–15, 25.

50. Diogenes Laertius, *The Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*, trans. C. D. Yonge (London: Henry Bohn, 1853), 28.

51. Vico’s influence on Gramsci is further discussed in Ernesto Grassi, *Humanismus und Marxismus: Zur Kritik der Verselbständigung von Wissenschaft* (Leipzig: Rowohlt, 1973), 65ff.

The ancient Romans must likewise have had such a Solon. Roman history . . . relates how, in their heroic contentions with the nobility, the plebeians at Rome protested that the fathers chosen for the Senate by Romulus “had not descended from heaven” . . . the founders of the patriciate did not have the divine origin of which the patricians boasted. Instead, Jupiter was equal for all. This is the civil and historical sense of the Virgilian tag *Iupiter omnibus aequus*, Jupiter is equal for all. . . . Reflecting on this, plebeians began to seek equality with the patricians in civil liberty [*adeguare co' patrizi la civil libertà*], and eventually changed the Roman republic from an aristocracy to a democracy [*la romana repubblica da aristocratica in popolare*]. (§415)

Here Vico illustrates plebian philology in practice, both with respect to its method of interpretation as well as its substantive claims. His hermeneutics is focused on etymologies and popular sayings rather than on texts because texts are addressed exclusively to the elite. Vico argues that the aristocracy, including the class of the philosophers entrusted with interpreting esoteric knowledge, merely rewrote what the plebeians knew all along. In the same sense that philosophy derives from and depends on the authority of language (which is democratically guaranteed by the plebeians), so does philology subjugate itself to reason, in the form of common sense. Any attempt to derive philosophy from a source other than the poetry that is the collective creation of a common plebeian humanity, as Descartes and Augustine sought to do, is doomed to obsolescence. From this perspective, theology based on revelation is the philosophical equivalent of Cartesian rationalism (and vice versa). For Vico, democratic constitutions are established not through the esoteric knowledge of an elite class of philosophers or theologians, nor through hypothetical *cogitos* that Charles Peirce—another, later, democratic thinker with as-yet-unstudied Vichian leanings—dismissed as “paper doubt” in a polemic against Descartes, but through the poetic knowledge and the philological insight of the plebs.<sup>52</sup>

Vico argues plebeians practiced both philology and democracy more effectively than the philosophers. He words that follow from the quotation cited above are even more breathtaking in their universalism that is the text that precedes it. “We shall prove,” Vico announces, “both through reasons [*ragioni*] and through authority [*autorità*] that the plebeians of [all] peoples [*plebi de' popoli*] took Solon’s reflection literally, and so changed the commonwealths from aristocracies to democracies [*cangiarono le repubbliche da aristocratiche in popolari*]” (SN §415). The phraseology here

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52. *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, ed. C. Hartshorne, P. Weiss, and A. Burks, 8 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931–58), 5:514.

repeats verbatim the claims made just two sentences earlier, with the major difference that, in this second iteration, the plebeians are now acting in a *universal* capacity (*universalmente*), rather than as mere representatives of a specific social class in ancient Rome. They are plebeians of peoples generally, not of one specific polity. These universal subjects are the agents through which world history, in Vico's account, is transformed, and plebian philology is rendered as a knowledge form. Like the Roman plebeians, they seek "equality," or, in a more literal rendering of Vico's words, they adapt and adjust the civil liberties enjoyed by the patricians to their own needs and demands. While it is possible to question where Vico envisions here that the plebeians that the plebeians are demands full equality of rights in the contemporary sense his language unambiguous shows that the plebeians are seeking to adjust the rights according to them according to their sense of justice and that this sense of justice is informed by the rights that are already accorded to the patricians. The link Vico draws—in both the case of the Roman plebeians and plebeians generally—between the demand for civil liberties that approximate those enjoyed by the patricians and the transformation of the republic from an aristocracy to a form of popular governance (that I have translated as "democracy") makes this point unambiguously clear.

On Vico's account, the plebeians changed the internal constitution of their polities by internalizing the phrase inscribed in Athens's public spaces: "Know thyself." The saying had long been associated with Solon, but Vico was the first modern theorist to deduce from Solon's precept a political grounding for vernacular democracy. Solon's "Know thyself" is understood by Vico as an injunction to plebian philology. Responding to this injunction means engaging in interpretation, exegesis, and analysis, as well as in the generation of poetic knowledge. On Vico's account, such activities necessarily conduce to a republic's transformation from an aristocracy to a democracy.

By demanding to be governed according to a text that was legible to them, the plebeians instituted the transition from aristocracy to democracy. Rather than locating democracy more conventionally in the political theories of Plato and Aristotle, Vico locates the origins of democratic politics in a legal system that preceded them both. Only after Greek thought fell into the possession of the elites, according to Vico, did Solon's "Know thyself" lose its political edge. The self that was the object of knowledge in Solon's dictum was elevated to a metaphysical category. Originally, "Know thyself" was a political injunction, and it was understood as such by the plebeians of ancient Greece.

Vico later repeats his interpretation, adding that even before Solon, Aesop had expressed similar counsels in the form of extended similes (SN §424). Elsewhere, Vico claims that "metaphor comprises most of the language among all nations" (§444). The linking of figures of speech that are premised on an aesthetic of comparison, such

as simile and metaphor, to broader forms of perception once again demonstrates the mutually constitutive relations between philological-poetic perception and political agency; simile involves the recognition of likeness, and metaphor borrows attribute from one object and attaches them to another.<sup>53</sup> In *De antiquissima*, Vico had called this capacity *ingenium*, “the faculty that connects disparate or diverse things” (DA, 118), and related it to geometrical reasoning.<sup>54</sup> Ingenuity was also not coincidentally a trait Vico ascribed to himself in his autobiography.<sup>55</sup> In the *New Science*, *ingenium* becomes a precondition for democracy.

That Vico’s rendering of poetic perception, as of the relation between philology and philosophy, is simultaneously an epistemology, an aesthetics, and a political theory of democracy is apparent from his account of the development of human knowledge, beginning with induction, then moving to dialectic, and concluding in syllogism. He writes that proofs originally relied on “example, which requires only one similarity; and eventually by induction, which requires several [similarities]. The father of all the philosophical sects, Socrates, used induction to establish dialectic. Later, Aristotle perfected it in the syllogism, which requires universals for its validity” (SN §424). Later, reinforcing this genealogy, Vico insists that “the history of human ideas is strikingly confirmed by the history of philosophy itself” (§499). This genealogy mirrors the condensed account of the development of knowledge offered earlier in the *New Science*: “Men at first feel without observing, then they observe with a troubled and agitated spirit, finally they reflect with a clear mind” (§218). Far from opposing these radically different forms of reasoning, Vico situates them within a continuum that is classified according to the locus of political agency and that includes poetic knowledge.

Conceptual universals had little purchase on reality until power passed from the *bestioni* to the ruling class, but the empirical, conceptual, and structural interdependency of philological and philosophical knowledge centrally motivates Vico’s epistemology. The movement from popular wisdom to esoteric philosophy, including metaphysics, logic, and ethics, is rehearsed once again through Solon’s example at the end

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53. This distinction is further explicated in the context of Islamic literary theory in Rebecca Gould, “The Persian Translation of Arabic Aesthetics: Rādūyānī’s Rhetorical Renaissance,” *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric* 33, no. 4 (2016): 339–71. An influential Vichian account of the relation among different figures of speech in time is Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957).

54. For further discussion of the uses of *ingenium* in Vico’s oeuvre, see Mooney, *Vico in the Tradition of Rhetoric*, 135–69.

55. *Opere di Giambattista Vico*, ed. Francesco Saverio Pomodoro, 1:1 (= AGV, 111). In this passage, Vico says that from his earliest childhood he belonged to those who possess “ingenuity and depth [*uomini ingegnosi e profondi*]” and who therefore “are as quick as lightening in perception” and “take no pleasure in shallow witticisms or falsehoods.”

of the final book of the *New Science*, where it is discussed as part of the conceptual dependency of elite knowledge (philosophy, jurisprudence) on the vernacular common sense of the plebs. This leads Vico to a sweeping conclusion that encapsulates his central argument. “We may therefore conclude,” Vico declares, “that all principles of metaphysics, logic, and ethics originated in the Athens marketplace” (SN §457; cf. §1043). Vico’s postulate explains how Solon, originally an embodiment of vernacular wisdom, became a guardian of esoteric knowledge that was subsequently known only to the elite. Through this process, which Vico sees repeated throughout world history, the relation entailed in Seneca’s famous lament, later made even more famous by Nietzsche, whereby “that which was philosophy has become philology” (*Epistula* 108, 23) was repeated.<sup>56</sup> Far from lamenting the reduction of philosophy to philology, Vico theorizes the conditions of possibility for this disciplinary transmutation, which he regards as foundational to democracy. He looked to Solon’s democratic legal system as a source for a new critical, and for the first time, wholly vernacular, philology. Vico grounded his political philology not in the Greece of Plato and Aristotle, but in the “popular wisdom” of the plebs, which he consistently distinguished from philosophical, esoteric knowledge.

### VERNACULARITY AND DEMOCRACY

More than any philosopher of his age although like many who followed in his path, Vico perceived the struggle between the *bestioni* and the *eroi* as the major political force in history.<sup>57</sup> Also in contradistinction to his contemporaries, Vico recognized that the history of plebian oppression could be traced to the very origins of humanity. Equally, he perceived that plebians’ resistance to being ruled according to conditions not of their own choosing begins in antiquity—and indeed prior to antiquity with the *bestioni*. In stark contrast to Hobbes, Vico believes that no people would willingly accept servitude, and no one would knowingly consent to their subjugation. In this sense, Vico’s genealogy of human knowledge, and of the ever-shifting relation between philosophy and philology is also a history of human freedom. Vico was a backward-looking philosopher who developed a radical template for the future of humanity.

In contradistinction to his epigones, Vico saw that the metaphysical order legitimating class oppression was grounded in power dynamics that had evolved over time.

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56. Cited in James I. Porter, *Nietzsche and the Philology of the Future* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 35.

57. For a classic analysis of this antinomy as it plays out over the course of Vico’s oeuvre, see Arnaldo Momigliano, “Vico’s *Scienza nuova*: Roman ‘*Bestioni*’ and Roman ‘*Eroi*,’” *History and Theory* 5, no. 1 (1966): 3–23.

He detected this structural inequality in the etymology of the word *man* (*vir*), which originally referred not to any member of the human species but solely to the nobility. Slaves by contrast were referred to as *ver*, from whence derives the term *vernacular* (§§556–57). In light of this etymology, it should come as no surprise that *vernacular* (along with the demographic it represented) is a term of opprobrium in most of the world's major classical languages, including Sanskrit, Arabic, Greek, and Latin, given that these languages have been cultivated largely by the ruling elite.<sup>58</sup> Vico dwells at length on the consequences of vernacularization for world history, for the struggle among different social demographics, and for democratic legitimacy.

The *New Science* could only have been written in the vernacular. Had it been written in Latin like Vico's other philosophical treatises, it would have violated the very principles it preached.<sup>59</sup> Auerbach found Vico brilliant and provoking but lacking according to his historicist paradigm.<sup>60</sup> Meanwhile, Benedetto Croce homogenized Vico as a precursor to liberal political theory. In his book-length study of Vico, Croce presented Vico's *New Science* as one stage in his grand "history of liberty." Croce missed how Vichian politics both anticipates and supersedes the historical determinism that underwrites Croce's brand of liberal political thought. Rather than recapitulate a series of law without human agency, Vico's plebian philology *generates* democracy. Even while allowing for the cyclical recurrence (*ricorsi*) of the past, the Vichian vision of historical change is drastically unlike Croce's Hegelian dialectic. My reading of Vico suggests that one reason why literary critics and political theorists alike have failed to appreciate Vico's originality is that his understanding of the central role of plebian philology in making world history breaches political and aesthetic norms.

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58. The classic comparative study of literary vernacularization, focusing primarily on the Sanskrit and Latin interface with Indic and European vernaculars, is Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006). Also see Walter Cohen, "The Rise of the Written Vernacular: Europe and Eurasia," *PMLA* 126, no. 3 (2011): 719–29. Vernacularity in the Arab-Islamic context is discussed in Ronit Ricci, *Islam Translated: Literature, Conversion, and the Arabic Cosmopolis of South and Southeast Asia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

59. Vico preferred reading in Latin to reading in Italian, and even in the various editions of the *New Science*, his Italian is notable its archaic spellings and the profusion of Latinisms. Another interesting stylistic distinction between Vico's Latin and Italian suggestive of class difference is that his *Universal Law*, written in Latin, is amply footnoted and sources are given for all citations, whereas none of the Italian editions of the *New Science* have footnotes.

60. James Porter discusses Auerbach's writings on Vico in detail but without commenting on the limitations in Auerbach's interpretation in his introduction to *Time, History, and Literature: Selected Essays of Erich Auerbach*, ed. James I. Porter and trans. Jane O. Newman (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), xxxi–xxxiv.

Pace Vico's twentieth century interpreters, the *New Science* is less an account of liberty than of *liberation*. A political subject be nominally free without being liberated, just as the subject can be liberated without being free. The civil liberties that Vico's plebeians demanded for themselves (*SN* §§106, 415, 420) is not reducible to a concept of universal freedom, which remained an abstraction. Nor is it precisely a human right, although Vico was one of the first to theorise democratic legitimacy in a way that privileged neither the ruling class, nor any specific nation, religion, gender, or race. Vico perceived that historical change was generated by the *corsi* and *recorsi* of history. While he expected that the plebeians would, at various junctures in history, prevail over the ruling class, he knew that these victories were fragile and contingent—and as fungible and subject to manipulation as language itself.

Theorists who have built on Vico's edifice have arguably gone too far in assimilating his thought to our modernity, when in fact Vico matters to us know precisely in proportion to his distance from us. Having been labeled a proto-Marxist, proto-historicist, and proto-typologist of literary form, Vico is in fact none of these—and also much more. Vico's departures from the disciplinary norms of philology and philosophy confound attempts to ground disciplinary knowledge within fixed and unchanging hierarchies. In the context of early modern thought, Vico's repositioning of philological inquiry as a foundation for philosophical knowledge marked a relatively new horizon in the history of the humanities.<sup>61</sup> It also demarcated a new frontier in the history of politics and in future political possibility.

For Vico, plebian philology is as much an epistemic locution and a political claim as a disciplinary method. His merger of philosophy and philology is an injunction to the reformulation of democratic legitimacy along plebian lines. In making the plebian imagination constitutive of political authority as such, and in subordinating philosophical reason to this authority, Vico stimulated a form of critique (*critica*) that was to change human history. It was in this sense—and not in the senses discussed above—that he may be regarded as Marx's predecessor. In the introduction to his *New Science*, Vico announced his originality. "My work," he declared, "employs a new form of criticism [*nuova arte critica*] that was previously lacking" (*SN* §7). If we know what we

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61. It was of course not without precedent, as evidenced by Joseph Justus Scaliger, who set forth his own vision for critical philology in 1574; see Benedetto Bravo, "Critique in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries and the Rise of the Notion of Historical Criticism," in *History of Scholarship: A Selection of Papers from the Seminar on the History of Scholarship Held Annually at the Warburg Institute*, ed. C. R. Ligota and J.-L. Quantin (London: Warburg Institute, 2006), 135–96. For further on the subject of Vico's reconceptualization of philology within the context of philosophy, see Donald R. Kelly, "Vico's Road: From Philology to Jurisprudence and Back," *Giambattista Vico's Science of Humanity*, ed. Giorgio Tagliacozzo and D. P. Verene (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 15–29.

make by virtue of our role in creating, it follows that our knowledge is contingent on our politics. As a discipline that has distinguished itself from philosophy ever since Marx's call to change the world rather than simply to understand it, critical theory is plebian philology's progeny.<sup>62</sup> The reflection on Vico's plebian philology offered here has aimed to ground the Marxian concept of critique, so central to our understanding of the political dimensions of our everyday lives, in the vernacular knowledge form that Vico helped us to see, as if for the first time.

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62. Karl Marx/*Friedrich Engels Werke*, 3:7.

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