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## The Translation of Darwin and the Struggle for Italy<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** In this article, I address the influence of the theory of evolution on Italy's national ideology in the late nineteenth century. I focus on the 1864 translation of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) into Italian by Giovanni Canestrini and Leonardo Salimbeni, as well as Herbert Spencer's conceptual translation of evolutionary ideas from technical to popular language, to show how commonplace understandings of evolution were used in a rationalist nation-building project, especially by sociologist Scipio Sighele in his work *Il nazionalismo e i partiti politici* (1911). The influence of these two forms of translation on national ideology facilitated the belief that Italy was engaged in an international struggle for existence that, to be successful, required the nation to mobilize its people around a unified culture and take ownership of external colonies.

**Key Words:** Italy, nineteenth century, Canestrini, Sighele, Darwin, Spencer, evolution, survival of the fittest, imperialism

### Introduction

Over the past couple of decades, the rise of interdisciplinary fields (e.g., environmental humanities, medical humanities) and of new critical theories (e.g., post-humanism, eco-criticism, new materialism) demonstrates an effort to understand the entanglement of science with culture. These fields often pair formal analyses of cultural artifacts with their scientific contexts, bringing compelling perspectives to the study of culture, literature, philosophy, and politics. This article is concerned with the way in which scientific texts impacted Italian culture, specifically how the translation of major works by Charles Darwin influenced Italian thought in the post-Unification period.

In a recent article, historians of science Elena Canadelli, Paolo Coccia and Telmo Pievani trace, to reprise their title, the "profitable relationship" between Darwin and Italian literature.<sup>2</sup> They build on studies by Brömer, Landucci, and

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<sup>2</sup> Canadelli, Coccia, and Pievani survey prominent literary figures that include De Sanctis, Fogazzaro, Pascoli, Pirandello, D'Annunzio, Svevo, Gadda, Calvino, and Primo Levi. They describe each of these authors as having interpreted evolutionary theory with "irony, humor, tragedy, or pessimism," (484) and more generally associate the theory with the debates on the relationship between science and art, and between scientific ideas and the needs of society.