

End of a Cycle and a New Beginning

February 6, 2014

In March 2010, a few months before his death, Mario Monicelli, the unforgettable director of the 1958 caper film *Big Deal on Madonna Street* (*I soliti ignoti*), was interviewed live on Michele Santoro's program "Rai per una notte."² Disillusioned, Monicelli sketched the portrait of a subdued country, an Italy overcome with fear, which he then followed with expressing the hope of "a real blow [to the system], a revolution, something Italy has never experienced," because, according to him, redemption only comes from sacrifice and pain.

Monicelli's intervention was a perfect fit for the program, whose host, Michele Santoro, made attacking the government of Silvio Berlusconi his main on-air hobbyhorse. But its principal interest lies in the fact that the film director appeared to neither entertain the idea of, nor—even less so—aim for, getting rid of Berlusconi alone. He clearly understood then that the task was not merely to remove a politician from power but indeed to be rid of Berlusconiism, "an eclectic ideology made of populism, extreme individualism, historical revisionism, and the use of religion instrumentally as a foundation for identity politics."³ In short, the goal was to transform an Italian society in which a certain "right-wing culture" took hold well beyond the partisan boundaries and long before Berlusconi's 1994 dramatic entry into politics, a culture whose roots can be found in the 1980s—that beginning of the "great leap backward" (Serge Halimi)—the "accursed eighties" of Thatcher and Reagan, of the ubiquitous "get-rich-quick," the forced individualism of "individuals without individuality," and antipolitics.⁴

Yet despite all that, when, on November 12, 2011 at 9:42 PM, Berlusconi left office with the crowds booing, his demise was due not to popular pressure but to the demands imposed by international financial markets. And for good reason. In the preceding three decades, in the wake of the unprecedented high-point it reached during the after-war years, the Italian Left (but should one perhaps speak in the plural, of Lefts?) frayed, decomposed, and "lost its spine,"⁵ ebbing towards its current disastrous condition of dwindling hope and receding horizons. The electoral breakthrough, last February, of "MoVimento 5 Stelle" (M5S - the Five Star Movement), the movement led by comedian Beppe Grillo, which took place against a background of social and political crisis, corresponds to the end of a long political cycle whose aftermath is as yet hard to discern.⁶ On the Left, the idea that "new beginnings" are necessary has for several weeks now dominated the period of waiting.⁷

The Newcomers and the Plural Right

Seen from the outside, but not exclusively, the political jolts of the last twenty or thirty years could represent the features of an Italian *Sonderweg*, explainable by the "Latin" anomalies of a weak nation. "The Italian way" is indeed the watchword of journalistic commentary, and is applied to all the political systems that took hold on the Italian peninsula, from fascism to today—an expression that seeks to limit the implications and downplay the meaning of the most diverse political phenomena that have emerged and developed in Italy. Yet in many respects Italy has served as a true political "laboratory" at the heart of Europe. And if this observation holds without a doubt for the length of the twentieth century, it assumes additional weight with regards to the makeup of this new, "plural"⁸ Right that emerged in Italy from the upheavals of the early 1990s—a period marked by the collapse of the political system and the disappearance of the Communist, Socialist, and Christian Democratic parties, caught in the "Tangentopoli" corruption storm and the judiciary machine of "mani pulite" (clean hands), but also by the collapse of the Lira; in 1994 the Italian public

debt reaches 121.8 percent of GNP and the rate of unemployment explodes.

As one recalls, it is then that Silvio Berlusconi founds “Forza Italia” and presents his movement as the best positioned to assure the passage to a “new Republic,” against an “old political class overthrown by reality and overtaken by the times.” He then emphasizes his desire to constitute a “pole of liberty” against the “cartel of the Lefts,” and promises “a great, new, marvelous Italian miracle.”⁹ The public appearance of this new political force—associated with the face change of the neo-fascist Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI), which in 1995 becomes Alleanza Nazionale under the strong push of Gianfranco Fini, and with the powerful surge, from the early 1980s, of Umberto Bossi’s party, La Lega Nord (Northern League)—changes the image of the Italian Right and inscribes it as a permanent feature of the political landscape.



While this is not the place to retrace the history of Italy since that faraway year of 1994, a few gridlines will nevertheless permit a better grasp of the defining features of the period that began with that decade. Its key element was without a doubt the change that took place in the way Italian society related to politics and in particular to those political organizations born in the first half of the twentieth century. While in Europe there was, beginning with the 1980s, a general disaffection with politics, in Italy it was coupled with the “moral” crisis that preceded and accompanied operation “clean hands,” a series of judicial investigations that exposed a vast network of corruption in which the political world and the financing of the parties were implicated.

It is precisely in that fault line that Berlusconi’s new formation appeared, and that despite the fact that the Milanese entrepreneur was himself “deeply implicated in the corruption of the last phase of the First Republic.”¹⁰ Berlusconi’s “discesa in campo,” his entry into the political arena, constituted a true earthquake; a poll concerning “events that have changed Italy the most during the last three decades,” conducted in July 2012, put it third in order of importance, below the economic crisis and the introduction of the Euro in 1996, but above Tangentopoli, terrorism, and Berlusconi’s own political exit in 2011.¹¹ Thus, as historian Antonio Gibelli declared in 2010, Berlusconi had indeed “made history.”¹² Berlusconi embodied some of the most salient features of the change in Italian society’s relation to politics, manufacturing and personifying the new “imaginary” of a side of Italy in

which the informal economy plays a structural role, in which individualism dominates—and indeed the most elementary ties of social solidarity vanish—and in which society's "political passion" has been replaced by atomization, and its vision of the world limited to the glitter-covered dancers on offer on every national television channel. One effect of Berlusconi's amazing staying power was that, in part, the Italian public accepted as natural the dissolution of a whole series of paradigms on which its relation to politics and civil society had previously rested.¹³

To this one must add the extraordinary cultural strength of the new Right that emerged in the 1990s, setting the tone for Italian society. This strength lay primarily in a new way of combining diverse political cultures, which did not however smooth the rough edges specific to each tradition. The new culture rested on a particularly effective network (public as well as private TV chains, daily newspapers, journals...) that set itself the task of reshaping public opinion, but also on the construction of narratives of "origins" that made do with whatever the totality of its components was able to provide, from Umberto Bossi's Northern League, that linked frenzied regionalism, racism, and anti-statism, to the neo-fascism of Alleanza Nazionale. Anti-communism was one of the key ideological elements uniting the forces that rallied around Berlusconi. This anti-communism was founded on the memory of an Italian Communist Party that during its history had at one time exceeded two million members, controlled the strongest trade union on the peninsula, and inserted itself in every fissure of Italian society—an unavoidable aspect of the imperfect two-party system that Giorgio Galli described at the end of the 1960s.

The anti-communism of the coalition that formed this plural Right corresponded thus well to an anti-communism of interests, being a convenient fig leaf behind which to battle the welfare state, impose the most anti-social policies, and undo the very conditions of social emancipation. Furthermore, Berlusconi group's stated intention of building a new republic required the utterly uncompromising discrediting of anti-fascism and of the Italian constitution born of the Resistance. It was Gianfranco Fini who played a decisive role in this politics of memory. In 1995, speaking in Fiuggi, Fini called for closing the door on the "century of ideologies," and consigning both fascism and anti-fascism to the history books—seeing that as late as 1994 Fini called Mussolini "the greatest statesman of the century," the effort should have been transparent.¹⁴ In 2000, the regional government of Lazio, led by Francesco Storace of the Alleanza Nazionale and fully committed to this rewriting of history, tasked a commission of experts with censoring the "facetious" school textbooks.¹⁵ In 2002, it was at the national level that a similar political agenda sought to oppose "an ideological political vision that had often distorted irrefutable historical facts for political purpose" in the name of the "non-ideological" reading of history.¹⁶

This historiographic revisionism was massively broadcast by the media, as it satisfied "a public demand" that conceived "history from the standpoint of its end, of an absolute present in which the relationship with the past is molded to the requirements of the laws of the spectacle."¹⁷ Berlusconi's numerous "gaffes," the last one comparing his children to the Jews under Hitler, are no more than a deviant caricature of the deep roots this historiographic revisionism sank into Italian society. To underestimate this is to fail to understand that this revisionism and its diffusion are also responsible for the Left's difficulty of developing a "revolutionary critique of the present."

"Two Woes in a Single Body"

Certainly, the strength of this "right-wing culture" in Italian society in the last twenty years can be explained by reference to a long list of factors: the "crisis" of the models and cultural values of the "short twentieth century"—this crisis, already embryonic in the 1980s, explodes following the fall of the Berlin Wall; the "destruction of the past, or rather of the social mechanisms that link one's contemporary experience to that of earlier generations, ... one of the most characteristic and eerie phenomena of the late twentieth century"¹⁸; the "end of history" (Francis Fukuyama) looming over

the horizon of capitalism's uncontested victory with its share of enslavement, austerity, poverty, and precariousness; the disorientation that comes with the new challenges and risks faced by a society undergoing a deep mutation, in which the working class drops from sight; but also, and more specific to Italy, that which Francesco Biscione called "the underground of the Republic," namely, the persistence in the peninsula after the Second World War of an anti-democratic and anti-communist culture, which proved a fertile ground for Berlusconi's coalition to plow.¹⁹

All these factors are necessary for comprehending the apparent "victory" of this new Right, but not sufficient. This victory cannot be understood without noting the opening created by the crisis of the Left and the effective support for Berlusconi by parts of it, support which allowed him throughout these twenty years "to clean his slate and entrench his power."²⁰ Thus the reorganization of the political field of the Left was essentially limited to presenting an alternative government, first social-democratic (with the 1991 forming of the Democratic Party of the Left and, in 1998, the Left Democrats), then merely democratic—the creation of the Democratic Party in 2007, born from the fusion of former members of the Left Democrats with the Catholics of Romano Prodi.²¹

The Center-Left so constituted, pretending to rid itself of the "dead weight" of twentieth-century totalitarianisms, left by the wayside the political and cultural baggage, the very history of struggle, of the Italian workers' movement, which was already reeling from the repeated attacks of the Socialist Bettino Craxi, close friend of Berlusconi and prime minister in the 1980s. To this was added the deafening, guilty silence of post-communist intellectuals, who abandoned it to the general hounding. The Center-Left thus showed itself amenable to a rereading of the recent past, and in particular of the period of the resistance and anti-fascism, calling for the creation of a "shared memory" on which would then rest the legitimacy of governments coming from the two political poles that have been contesting power between them since 1994.

In fact, the reorganization of the Left corresponded to the abandonment of that heterogeneous group consisting of those who were attached to the idea of social emancipation, namely, those who called themselves communists and of which Giorgio Gaber recalled in 1992 "that they were two people in one body. On the one hand, the personal, everyday strain, and on the other hand, the sense of belonging to a species that wanted to take off and really change life."²² This abandonment was accompanied by the very renunciation of the ideas of justice and equality. Indeed, between 1996 and 2001 the governments of the Center-Left showed themselves to be the most assiduous in the service of the "virtuous" economic policies of public debt reduction, with their share of liberalization and privatization. In parallel, the Center-Left responded to the "authoritarian democracy" instituted by Berlusconi and his coalition as soon as they consolidated their power, from 2001 on, with the rhetoric of "the lesser evil," thus condemning the radical Left that regrouped in 1991 in the ranks of the Rifondazione Comunista to the single choice between impotence and surrender.

No doubt the same transformation that the Italian Left underwent has been at work everywhere in Europe at about the same time, but in Italy it played a pioneering role that would have a uniquely devastating impact when Rifondazione Comunista, the only radical left party with a national presence, in the words of the writer Daniel Bensaid, is transformed from the "lyrical movementism" of its full participation in the 2001 protests in Genoa, to joining the governing coalition of Romano Prodi in 2006.²³ It is then that, as in the lyrics of Giorgio Gaber, the political horizon recedes because "the dream has withered," and nothing remains except "the person cut in two, on the one side, the one traversing obsequiously the dullness of daily survival, and on the other side, the seagull who gave up the intention of flying. Two woes in a single body."²⁴

New Beginnings...

And now? Silvio Berlusconi's repeated forays back into the political arena after his booed 2011 exit;

the “technical” government of Mario Monti, a “technocratic white knight whose mandate was to make the tough decisions needed to set Italy right,”²⁵ at a time when the Italian public debt reached 1,905 billion Euros²⁶; the constitution, in April 2013, of the sacred union government by the former Christian-Democrat Enrico Letta—so much tossing and turning that marks the end of a long political cycle, the slow agony of a political system at its last breath.

Meanwhile, Italy dives deeper into the crisis. Thousands of businesses have closed their doors and unemployment is off the charts, especially among the young. Millions live in poverty; a growing number of Italians lose their house when they lose their job. And the inexorable numbers of austerity measures hit workers—whether in traditional jobs or the new, precarious, economy—the unemployed, retirees, men and women alike.

As destructive as the social situation is, the solutions proposed by the Left (and I obviously exclude DP from this locution), both on questions of organization and as a matter of strategic horizon, appear heading towards an impasse. Between 2011 and 2013, the Italian social movements rediscovered—in parts without realizing it—the strength and creativity of their predecessors, the 2001 no-global, the Italian version of the anti-globalization movement, certainly, but also those of the end of the 1960s, the 1970s, and even the 1980s, that sought to redefine, reinvent, and rethink the spaces of the struggle for social liberation. From the farmers of the South to the activists of No-TAV who opposed the high-speed train,²⁷ from the Sicilian environmental No MUOS to the many committees that emerged from the incredible mobilizations in defense of the commons,²⁸ from students and artists fighting for freedom of expression and the right to education to migrants protesting for their rights, social movements have indeed continued to grow in strength against every headwind (repression of demonstrations, threat of disproportionate sentencing, censorship of media, etc.), tirelessly bringing their demands into workplaces, public squares, cultural spaces, and online. The last mobilization was as recent as this fall: in October, a general strike lead by the COBAS, CUB, and USB labor organizations²⁹ brought together tens of thousands of activists, migrants, and workers.³⁰

Thousands of conflagrations thus continue to flare up all across the peninsula, but fail the task of finding the capacity to converge and to propose general answers that are capable of expression in the political field. Even more worrying is that the only movement that appears able to canalize this flurry of unrest is the M5S movement of Beppe Grillo, which became the largest political party nationally following the February 2013 elections, in which it won 25.55 percent of the vote in the lower Chamber and 23.79 percent in the Senate. This is a movement that, ideologically “non-ideological,” declares itself “neither left, nor right,” stigmatizes the “criminality of African immigrants,” offers to collaborate with (the neo-fascist) Casa Pound movement, and—through one of its elected representatives—holds that “fascism was originally good and only turned bad later because of racism and the war.”³¹ And the guru of M5S’s leader, Gianroberto Casaleggio, the person behind the 2005 creation of the blog BeppeGrillo.it, participated in the Forum Ambrosetti, an annual gathering of the movers and shakers of Italian capitalism. Strongly centralized around the media star personality of the billionaire Beppe Grillo, who is alone authorized to speak for the movement, M5S thus appears as the almost perfect product of Berlusconism. Yet M5S cannot be simply dismissed, as it is, with much complacency, by members of the Democratic Party—whom Beppe Grillo calls the “DP minus the L” of liberty, to make the point of the almost complete sameness, in terms of actual policies, between the Democrats and Berlusconi’s party, the People of Liberty—or by, for example, Rossana Rossanda, who describes it as the “typical right-wing *whoever-ism*,”³² just as it cannot be reduced to the fact that some of its voters used to vote for the Left (but for which left?).

In fact, M5S embodies not only the rejection of austerity, euroscepticism, and the criticism of the “political caste,” but also another political expression that one finds in some variation almost everywhere in Europe, but which has very deep roots in the underground of Italy: the *sovversivismo*,

subversivism, that Antonio Gramsci described in his prison notebooks. As the Sardinian Communist wrote,

the purely Italian concept of the “subversive” can be explained as follows: a negative rather than a positive class position—the people is aware that it has enemies, but only identifies them empirically as the so-called *signori* [lords].... The “subversivism” of these strata has two faces, one turned to the left and one turned to the right, but the left face is simply a means of blackmail; and at the decisive moments always moves to the right, and their “desperate courage” always prefers to have the carabinieri on their side.³³

Only time will tell. But one thing is already certain: M5S and its 2013 electoral victory—a true political “tsunami,” according to the explicit goals of the Genoan comedian—did not deliver a “decisive blow” to the so-called Second Republic, instituted by the respective efforts, each in its turn, of Berlusconi’s formation and the Center-Left. It is true that at the time this text is written, the Italian Right is undergoing a crisis, triggered by the creation of the “New Center-Right” by Angelino Alfano, Berlusconi’s protégé. Yet nothing has really changed, thus seemingly justifying Pasolini’s observation that “Italy is a circular country, leopard-like, in which everything changes so as to remain the same.”³⁴

Despite the grandiloquent prognostications of M5S, the system has not collapsed; the “popular uprising” is yet to come; but injustice moves on with an even surer foot.³⁵ “There is an open war in Italy,” denounced recently by the writer Andrea Camilleri, a war that is going to waste two or three generations.³⁶ While waiting, Italy’s radical Left, recording the fact that “everywhere in Europe” “the anticapitalist left forces experience a difficulty both material and of political strategy,” declares “new beginnings.”³⁷ Indeed, “Sinistra Critica” (the “Critical Left”) was born already in 2007, in response to Rifondazione Comunista’s turn towards participation in the government, as

a political project which, in the framework of the Rifondazione Comunista experience, aimed to blend the necessary refounding of Marxist thought and practice with energies made available by the new social and political movements. In this sense, it has found inspiration and its political project in social disputes, in the life and vicissitudes of the labor movement, in the antiglobalization and for peace movements, in the new feminism and in the LGBT movement.³⁸

Today, noticing that it has not been able “to produce a strong and credible alternative to the drift of the Italian left,” Sinistra Critica dissolved itself to allow for the hatching of other projects, “one which proposes a political organization more than ever aimed at a strong class rooting, the other intent upon undertaking, in a class perspective, the way of promiscuity between ‘political’ and ‘social.’”³⁹ Yet one thing is nevertheless certain. In this transitional phase between the old that is dying and the new that cannot be born, it is difficult to discern how the radical left can play a role in a process that ties together the multiple foci of conflagration that flare up everywhere with their so many different idioms, but which strain to reveal a horizon of discontinuity with the present.

Footnotes

1. Translated from French by Gabriel Ash.
2. Rai per una notte, March 25, 2010.
3. Gabriele Turi, “Quella cultura che sopravviverà al suo interprete,” *La Repubblica*, Oct. 16, 2010.
4. Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid times: living in an age of uncertainty* (Oxford: Polity Press, 2007).
5. Perry Anderson, “Italy. An invertebrate left. Italy’s Squandered Heritage,” *London Review of Books*, March 12, 2009.
6. The capitalized V refers to the 2007 inauguration of Beppe Grillo’s movement with the launch of

the so-called vaffanculo day, literally “fuck you” day, a day of anger against Italian politics.

7. Sinistra Critica (Critical Left), The National Coordination Committee of Sinistra Critica, “New Beginnings,” Aug. 29, 2013.

8. G. Caldiron, *La destra plurale. Dalla preferenza nazionale alla tolleranza zero* (Rome: Manifestolibri, 2001).

9. Silvio Berlusconi, “Il discorso della discesa in campo. Per il mio Paese,” Jan. 26, 1994.

10. Perry Anderson, “An entire order converted into what it was intended to end,” *London Review of Books*, Feb. 26, 2009.

11. Cf. here; see also Ilvo Diamanti, “‘Peggior di Berlusconi nessuno mai.’ Un Italiano su due boccia il ritorno,” *La Repubblica*, July 16, 2012.

12. Antonio Gibelli, *Berlusconi passato alla storia. L’Italia nell’era della democrazia autoritaria* (Rome: Donzelli, 2010).

13. Gianpasquale Santomassimo, “Marxismo e storia dal solido al liquido,” *Passato e Presente*, No. 72, 2007, p. 138.

14. Intervention of Filippo Focardi in the colloquium “Anti-Fascism in Question, 1922-1945: New Objects, New Debates,” held in Paris, June 2013.

15. See in this regard the work of the 7th Commission of the Italian Parliament, mentioned notably by G. Turi, cited in note 3. For the Lazio, see Consiglio regionale del Lazio, “Gruppo Alleanza nazionale-Mozione 9 novembre 2000,” in *Edscuola*.

16. Resolution 7-00163, approved by the 7th Commission of the Italian Parliament, Dec. 11, 2002.

17. Pier Paolo Poggi, *Nazismo e revisionismo storico* (Rome: Manifesto libri, 1997).

18. Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes. The Short Twentieth Century 1914-1991* (London: Abacus, 1997).

19. F. Biscione, *Il sommerso della Repubblica. La democrazia italiana e la crisi dell’antifascismo* (Turin: Bollati-Boringhieri, 2003).

20. Anderson, “An invertebrate left.”

21. Adele Sarno, “Stragi, il ‘papello’ e tangentopoli. 1992, l’anno che cambiò l’Italia,” *La Repubblica*, Oct. 18, 2011. Marco Berlinguer, “Qualcosa rinascerà ma sarà diverso,” interview with Rossana Rossanda, Nov. 18, 2012.

22. Giorgio Gaber, “Qualcuno era comunista,” 1992; See the video recording [here](#).

23. Daniel Bensaid, “Sur le retour de la question politico-stratégique” *Critique communiste*, no. 179, March 2006.

24. Gaber, “Qualcuno era comunista.”

25. Rachel Donadio, “As a Premier Prepares to Depart, the Talk Is of Lost Opportunities,” *New York Times*, Dec. 14, 2012.

26. *La Repubblica*, Dec. 14, 2012.

27. A civic mobilization in the Val de Suse, contesting the construction of a line of high-speed train intended to connect Turin to Lyon.

28. The No Muos bring together Sicilian activists fighting against the Mobile user objective system, a satellite communication system of the U.S. Navy. The committees for the defense of the common good emerge from the mobilizations around the referendum of June 12-13, 2011, against nuclear energy, water privatization, and “legitimate obstruction” (which allows government ministers to avoid trial); their startling victory in the referendum has been all but forgotten.

29. The COBAS (grassroots committees) emerged in the 1980s in various businesses and professional sectors, in response to trade unions federations deemed too conciliatory. Today, the two main forces in labor organization are Confederazione COBAS, primarily based in the public sector since its inception (in particular the teachers’ formation, the “Cobas della Scuola”), and the Unione sindacale di base (USB), formed in May 2010 by the unification of a number of independent unions including Rappresentanze sindacali di base (RdB), the Sindacato dei lavoratori intercategoriale (SdL), and parts of the Confederazione unitaria di base (CUB).

30. Andrea Martini, “18th and 19th October: two special days in the fight back in Italy,” Oct. 27,

2013.

31. See Andrea d'Urso, "Représentativité démocratique et conscience de classe," *Contre Temps*, No. 17, April 2013, pp. 111-35; Antonio Moscato, "Un nuovo bilancio del movimento di Grillo," Nov. 3, 2013.

32. Berlinguer, interview with Rossana Rossanda, Nov. 17, 2012. She refers here to l'Uomo qualunque, the movement of Guglielmo Giannini founded in 1944, which led a ferocious campaign against the antifascist parties and politics in general, a receptacle for discontent that would converge later in the Italian Social Movement (MSI).

33. A. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), p. 272.

34. Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Scritti corsari* (Milan: Garzanti, 1975), p. 87.

35. Alain Badiou, *Le réveil de l'histoire* (Paris: Lignes, 2011).

36. Andrea Camilleri, "Alla ricerca dell'impegno perduto," *Micromega*, No. 6, 2013.

37. Sinistra Critica, "New Beginnings."

38. Sinistra Critica, "New Beginnings."

39. Sinistra Critica, "New Beginnings." The two organizations coming out of these projects are Sinistra Anticapitalista and Solidarietà Internazionale.