

Federico Luisetti

The Italian Anomaly¹

In his recent book on Europe, *The New Old World* (2009), Perry Anderson dedicates a long chapter to the Italian “anomaly,”² describing with implacable humor Italy’s vain attempt to become “a normal country:” “Starting in the late eighties, and rising to a crescendo in the nineties, the cry as gone up that Italy must, at last, become a ‘normal country’. Such was the title of the manifesto produced in 1995 by the leader of the former Italian Communist Party. [...] Its message is that Italy must become like other countries of the West” (279). My short commentary will concentrate on Perry Anderson’s vivid account of this anomaly and then address the nature of Italy’s political derailment, as seen through the anamorphic lens of populism and the “unpolitical”. The common thread of the two sections will be represented by the distortive potential of the anomaly, an “insistent political catchword” (279) that is both a central topic of Perry Anderson’s chapter and an “obsessive refrain” across the spectrum of Italian political debates.

The Bachelor Machine

Perry Anderson offers a compelling illustration of the quantitative dimension of Italy’s “abnormality.” Beginning in the early nineties, the passage from the first to the second Republic has added an almost catastrophic twist to the well-known exceptionality of Italy’s weak national state, supplementing “immovable

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² The chapter on Italy (pp. 278-351) is divided in two parts, which were originally published in the *London Review of Books* on 21 March 2002, and 26 February and 12 March 2009.

government, pervasive corruption, and militarized crime” (280) with the “cultural counter-revolution of Berlusconi’s television empire” (330), the extinction of left-wing opposition, and the desolation of economic depression.

Convincingly, Perry Anderson connects this “panorama of national decay” (326) to the progressive embedment of Italy within the Leviathan of Europe’s Atlantic Order: “Contemporary efforts to normalize Italy have sought to reshape the country in the image either of the United States, or of the Europe now moving towards it [...] Italy is closely enmeshed in the European Union, its economy, military and diplomacy all subjected to supranational controls that leave little leeway for independent policy of any kind. The ideological and legal framework of the EU rules out any break with a standard liberal-democratic regime” (307, 304). In his account, Berlusconi represents a perverse and yet logical outcome of the hypnotic mantra and social engineering of neoliberal capitalism: “In the world of Enron and Elf, Mandelson and Strauss-Kahn, Hinduja and Gates, what could finally be more logical than Berlusconi?” (307).

I totally sympathize with Perry Anderson’s efforts to illustrate Italy’s divergence from mainstream Western liberalism, and I believe that his *exposé* supports the geo-political portrait of Europe’s self-annihilation under an American-led Westernization provided by political theorists Cafruny and Ryner (2007). The pernicious consequences of the vicious circle of Italian “amoral familism” and neoliberal capitalism are vividly illustrated by Perry Anderson in their quantitative dimension. The magnitude of the Italian anomaly is before our eyes. Yet, what is the nature, the specific quality of this anomaly? What can we learn from the Italian experiment in decadence and disintegration? As Fredric Jameson would say, is there a chance to “change the valences” of the Italian phenomenon through a “visionary act” of political imagination, and “open up the current system in the direction of something else?” (65).

In the attempt to perform such a gesture of political shamanism, I propose to look at the Italian anomaly from the perspective of two categories which are feverishly circulating in our current intellectual discourses: populism and the unpolitical. From Umberto Eco's characterization of "media populism" to Carlo Galli's recent definition of "plebiscitarian populism," Berlusconi's regime has been often categorized with the help of the notion of populism. In the extraordinary reading of the Italian anomaly provided by Ernesto Laclau, the structural abnormality of the Italian context is approached from the perspective of a structural populist logic, and then assumed as a utopian condition, an infrastructural instability that allows for the most extreme political outcomes: "The interest of the Italian case lies in the fact that Italy was the least integrated political system in Western Europe, the one in which the national state was less able to hegemonize the various aspects of social life. In such a situation, the community could not be taken for granted, and social demands could be absorbed only imperfectly by the central state apparatus" (190-1). Since no community can "be taken for granted," the Italian political battlefield, which is now hegemonized by Berlusconi's populism, has traditionally functioned – from Machiavelli to Mussolini, from Gramsci to Negri – as a dramatic and experimental laboratory for testing alternative models of social order. Let's consider the overdetermined nucleus of the present Italian anomaly, the political scam that sustains the bachelor machine of the current national regime: Silvio Berlusconi. Laclau's treatment of this almost unrepresentable subject privileges the idiosyncratic specificity of the Italian anomaly. Within the sophisticated construction of Italian populism, Berlusconi acts as the "point of crystallization" and "condensation," the "new core," the "anchoring point," the "metaphorical centre," the "empty signifier" (181-2) around which the heterogeneous forces and demands of a fragmented and dislocated order begin to rearticulate, reconstructing a stable differential system. It may be useful to remind

that Berlusconi's raise to power immediately followed the traumatic dissolution of Italy's Prima Repubblica and the judiciary movement of Mani Pulite, which literally wiped out an entire generation of political leaders, in particular the ruling Christian Democracy. We must also recall that Berlusconi's symbolic centrality acts as a hinge, a pivot around which turn diverging political demands: the territorial ethnic politics of Bossi's Northern League and the neo-fascist state nationalism of Fini's Alleanza Nazionale; the social conservatism of the Catholic Church and the "modernizing" efforts of the capitalist elite of the Unione Industriale; the sexual fantasies of Italy's de-politicized working class and the repressive authoritarianism of the school system.

Despite his enormous personal wealth, arrogant media control, mischievous political shrewdness, Masonic and Socialist ties – Perry Anderson usefully reminds that "fundamentally, he is the heir of Craxi" (321) – and organic collaterality with organized crime, Berlusconi is neither the demiurge of the Italian political dysfunction nor a meteorological accident. More likely, he is an *aleph*, an eventful *trompe-l'oeil*, the ornamental archivolt of Italy's exploded order, the empty barycenter of Italy's populist constructivism. His uncanny communicational charisma, shadowy past and corrupted business methods are not the causes but the diaphanous fulcrum of a refined populist breeding of "the Italian people." As Perry Anderson asserts, "Berlusconi is the capstone of a system that extends well beyond him" (323).

Quite provocatively, Laclau dismisses Don Sturzo's *Christian Democracy* as a "combination of corrupt localistic power and confessionality" (186) and anchors Berlusconi's populism in the "whole Italian tradition" of hegemonic political practices (182), the cherished legacy of the Italian Communist Party: "The Italian debate was deeply rooted in a wider question: how to constitute an Italian nation. [...] Creating hegemonically a unity – a homogeneity – out of an irreducible

heterogeneity. When Palmiro Togliatti chose the populist alternative in the years following the war, he described it unequivocally: the ‘*partito nuovo*’ had to carry out the ‘national tasks of the working class’: it had to be the rallying point of a multitude of disparate struggles and demands” (182). Following this program, in the absence of an authoritative liberal state, the Italian Communist Party of Togliatti and Berlinguer managed to achieve a coalescence of democratic demands, becoming the leading left-wing party of Western Europe.

Paradoxically, the political personnel that have built Berlusconi’s postmodern populism have come largely from the ranks of the former Italian Communist Party. Since the full list of names would occupy an entire page I mention only a few, starting with the influential Marxist philosopher Lucio Colletti, who became from 1996 a parliamentary deputy for Berlusconi’s party Forza Italia; the skillful deputies, journalists and ideologues of *berlusconismo* Saverio Vertone and Giuliano Ferrara (son of a former editor of *l’Unità*, the newspaper of the Italian Communist Party, founded by Antonio Gramsci); the congressman, minister and coordinator of Forza Italia Sandro Bondi, an ex-bureaucrat of the PCI.

Obviously, I am not proposing the silly argument that *berlusconismo* should be explained as a byproduct of Italian communism, as a farcical repetition of a Gramscian hegemony. Yet, in my opinion, we must also avoid the temptation of reducing the Leftist *trasformismo* to a matter of individual opportunism. Although Laclau can legitimately maintain that “populism is the democratic element in contemporary representative systems” (176), the massive contribution of the talented *intelligentsia* of the PCI to the construction of *berlusconismo* should be understood as a symptom of the regressive *milieu* faced by hegemonic practices in neoliberal Italy. In sharp contrast with the sterilizing systemic policies of the highly institutionalized Anglo-American regimes, the Italian power elite have fatally embraced a populist unification of unfulfilled demands, articulating the

dislocated interests and desires of Italian society around the perverse new core of Berlusconi's media. Stripped of their agenda, the Leftist parties have become a parody of the reactionary vision of *berlusconismo*, and the communist leaders Occhetto, D'Alema and Veltroni have lost election after election in their hopeless attempt to match Berlusconi's media populism and discursive emptiness.

We don't need to share a Lacanian orthodoxy or worship the "*objet petit a*" in order to realize that the democratic dream of constituting an Italian "people" out of a fragmented landscape of competing local identities and social classes has now been – perversely but also successfully – carried out by the libidinal ties of the naked showgirls and vociferously racist public sphere of Berlusconi's television channels. This dystopian reorganization of political order in Italy is a living testimony of the non-ineluctability of the Western liberal state apparatus. In *Europe at Bay*, Cafruny and Ryner have described the emergence of a new model of US "minimal hegemony." Within its own borders, Italy has followed another path, developing an aggressive "maximal hegemony" of media populism.

Before moving to the next topic, the unpolitical, I would like to formulate an open-ended question. What lesson can we draw from this implosive trajectory of Italian populism? Are we convinced that a diluted hegemonic strategy of democratic populism can function as an emancipative political tool? It is my belief that, given the intrinsically regressive nature of any totalizing attempt to constitute "the people" as "people," any leftist attempt to promote democratic populism will be systematically outperformed by the immunitarian forms of ethnic, regional, national, state or media populist interpellation. Fifty-six years after the publication of Pier Paolo Pasolini's poem *The Ashes of Gramsci*, are we ready for another disconsolate account of the nightmarish outcomes of the "national-popular?"

The Unpolitical

Perry Anderson's portrait of Italian intellectuals is equally provocative. Beside the "cultural counter-revolution of Berlusconi's television empire" (330) a spiraling downturn has exhausted the "great cathedral of left-wing culture in Italy" (339). With the terminal demise of Gramscian marxism, and the fade-out of the sociologically oriented *operaismo* of Raniero Panzieri, the Italian intellectual landscape of the Left has moved towards the "negative thought" of Massimo Cacciari, Mario Tronti and Giorgio Agamben, replacing action with paralysis, politics with aesthetics, historical thought with an "arid cult of specialization," and symmetrically Marx with Nietzsche and Heidegger, Gramsci with Weber and Schmitt, Croce with Wittgenstein and Benjamin (343). Putting aside the question of which paradigm could better serve the emancipative goals of Italian political thought, and purposely overlooking the epistemological warfare among Lacanian post-structuralism and Adornian marxism, Deleuzian *gauchisme* and Spinozian autonomism, Heideggerian deconstructionism and Foucauldian biopolitics, I will conclude my commentary by recalling an important concept, at the center of Italian thought since the late Seventies, the "unpolitical."

In a recent dialogue Roberto Esposito has summed up the presuppositions that have guided the theoretical discourse since the end of *anni di piombo*, the years of terrorism: "In Italy, between 1981 and 1986, [...] we became aware of the radical crisis of one of the main *topoi* of the leftist political culture, and more generally of the modern conception of politics. The old dialectic that used to connect the social class to the party, the movement to the State, a dialectic founded on contradiction and recomposition in a superior unity, was broken. Against the background of this new consciousness we became aware of the irreducible distance between the political subjects still relying on the modern categories of sovereignty, State, people and nation, and the new reality that has lost the transcendental warranty of a

political order” (*La politica al presente* 14; my translation). The Mediterranean populism of Berlusconi has emerged from a reactionary acceptance of this unpolitical domain, which has dislocated the *passéist* framework of the old European political culture, both leftist and rightist. Berlusconi’s unlawful virtuosity has dwarfed the populist post-politics of Blair and Sarkozy, constrained by their collocation within Europe’s most crystallized state apparatuses. Yet, the unpolitical turn has also opened up an unprecedented space of action and theoretical challenge that the recent developments of biopolitics are finally addressing.

The term unpolitical has been introduced in the Italian philosophical context in 1978 by Massimo Cacciari. Following a Schmittian decisionist reading of Nietzsche’s “grand politics,” Cacciari argues that “the unpolitical is not the refusal of the political, but the radical critique of the political. [...] The unpolitical is the reversal of value. And only this reversal can liberate the will to power in the direction of politics on a grand scale” (95). Yet, Cacciari’s Schmittian inflection of the unpolitical is not the prevailing occurrence of the term in the Italian debate. In a 1988 volume entitled *Categorie dell’impolitico*, Roberto Esposito has proposed a revision of this concept from the perspective of a biopolitical theory of conflict, in which the legacies of Machiavelli and Nietzsche, Spinoza and Foucault converge toward the dissolution of the Western framework of political thought: “the unpolitical [...] is not a political philosophy, a political theology or a political ideology. [...] By insisting on the inevitability of conflict, this category stresses the failure and constitutive antinomy of modern political philosophy, which is always a thought of order. Political philosophy, understood as the foundation of modern political science, was born with this neutralizing goal. Since political philosophy refuses to think a non-ordered or unrepresentable conflict, it is put into question by the unpolitical, which is always beyond its representation. [...] The ambition of Machiavelli is to imagine a conflict that resists both civil war and total absorption

by order”(18; my translation). While the modern tradition of political thought, from Hobbes to Hegel, from Kant to Habermas, aims at neutralizing and regulating tensions and divergences, the biopolitical paradigm of the unpolitical discovers the productivity and creativity of conflict, interrupting the magical spell that imprisons the individual in the sovereign order, the social class in the State, the movement in the society, singularities in their communities.

Because of its Nietzschean radicalism, the unpolitical notion of conflict stands firmly not only against the liberal and neoliberal traditions, but also against any attempt to revitalize a Eurocentric and Christian universalism. I am thinking, for instance, at Slavoj Žižek’s pseudo-ironic and disturbing *A Leftist Plea for ‘Eurocentrism’* (2006). Here Žižek’s misleading opposition of globalization and universalism serves the purpose of recuperating the “fundamental European legacy” of a “democratic politicization” of life. The ground for this reactive project is provided by an inflated Christian *ressentiment*, which assigns to politics the duty of “universalizing one’s particular fate as representative of global injustice” (203-206). On the contrary, the unpolitical mastery of conflict embraces Nietzsche’s uncompromising anti-Europeism and cult of the “Outside;” a re-orientation of Western political thought that is the source of the “political Orientalism” of Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, and Roland Barthes.

Thanks to its weak liberal tradition and dysfunctional State organization, the Italian anomaly has offered the chance to observe the current biopolitical regimes of Western societies through the magnifying lenses of the unpolitical. Hopefully, the grim profile of the “empty signifier” Berlusconi, his populist hypnotization of the people (“la gente”) and hegemonic reconciliation of interests and demands are not the fatal offspring of the Italian anomaly. Behind this eclipse of liberal democracy, the unpolitical foreshadows the virtuality of a line of escape from capitalist

governmentality, a new topology of struggle and political creativity. The promise of a communism of the uncommon.

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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