

Federico Luisetti - **The Italian Anomaly**

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I will divide my presentation in two parts. The first part will concentrate on Perry Anderson's vivid description of the Italian anomaly in his chapter on Italy of *The New Old World* [Verso, 2009; pp.278-351]; the second part, in expanding some of his arguments, will address the nature of this anomaly, as seen through the anamorphic lens of two converging terms: populism and the unpolitical. The common thread of the two sections of my talk will be provided by the distortive potential of the anomaly itself, an "insistent political catchword" that is both a central topic of Perry Anderson's chapter and an "obsessive refrain" across the spectrum of Italian political debates.

I quote from Perry Anderson's opening pages: "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 [Massimo D'Alema]. [...] Its message is that Italy must become like other countries of the West" (279).

In his book, Perry Anderson offers a compelling illustration of the quantitative dimension of Italy's "abnormality". Beginning in the early nineties, the passage from the so-called first to the second Republic has added an almost catastrophic twist to the well-known exceptionality of Italy's weak national state, supplementing "immovable 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 Perry Anderson’s 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, 304). I totally sympathize with Perry Anderson’s illustration of Italy’s derailment off mainstream Western liberalism, and I believe that his *exposé* supports the geo-political portrait of Europe’s self-destruction under an American-led Westernization, provided by Cafruny and Ryner in their study *Europe at Bay: In the Shadow of US Hegemony* [Lynne Rienner, 2007].

The pernicious consequences of the vicious circle of Italian “amoral familism” and neo-liberal capitalism are persuasively 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 Prof. Jameson would say, is there a chance to “change the valences” of the Italian phenomenon

through a “visionary act” of political imagination, “opening up the current system in the direction of something else”? [*Valences of the dialectic*, Verso, 2009, p. 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 discourses: populism and the unpolitical.

From Umberto Eco’s characterization of “media populism” to Carlo Galli’s recent definition of “plebiscitary populism” [*Le Monde Diplomatique*, Dec. 2009, p. 24], 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 in a chapter of *On Populist Reason* [Verso, 2005], the structural abnormality of the Italian context is approached from the perspective of a 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 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 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 rise 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, an infinitesimally small genetic mutation of neoliberal capitalism. More likely, he is an *Aleph*, an eventful *trompe-l’oeil*, the ornamental archivolt, 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 confessionism" (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 post-political 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 theorists of "berlusconismo" Saverio Vertone and Giuliano Ferrara, the son of the former editor of *l'Unita'*, the newspaper of the Italian Communist Party, founded by Antonio Gramsci; the congressman, minister and coordinator of Forza Italia Sandro Bondi, a former bureaucrat of the PCI.

Obviously, I am not proposing the silly argument that "Berlusconismo" may 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. If Laclau can legitimately maintain that "populism is the democratic element in

contemporary representative systems” (176), the contribution of the talented *intelligentsia* of the PCI to the construction of “berlusconismo” should be understood as a symptom of the regressive *milieu* of hegemonic practices in neoliberal Italy. In sharp contrast with the sterilizing systemic policies of the highly institutionalized Northern European and Anglo-American regimes, the Italian power elite have fatally embraced a wild and reactionary 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 progressive agenda, the leftist parties have become a parody of the reactionary vision of “berlusconismo”, while the post-communist leaders Occhetto, D’Alema and Veltroni have lost election after election in their vain attempt to match Berlusconi’s media populism and discursive emptiness.

We don’t need to share an orthodox Lacanian post-structuralism 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 Fininvest’s “la gente”, by the libidinal ties of the naked showgirls and vociferously racist public sphere of Berlusconi’s tv 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 describe 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. Fifty-six years after the publication of Pier Paolo Pasolini’s poem *The Ashes of Gramsci*, we are ready again for another disconsolate account of the nightmarish outcomes of the “national-popular”.

In his book chapter, Perry Anderson tells another interesting story. 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 has moved towards the “negative thought” (343) of Massimo Cacciari, Mario Tronti and Giorgio Agamben, replacing Marx with Nietzsche and Heidegger, Gramsci with Weber and Schmitt, Croce with Wittgenstein and Benjamin.

Given the scope of my presentation, I will omit the question of which paradigm can serve better the emancipative task of radical political thought. Putting aside the contest among Lacanian post-structuralism and Adornian marxism, Deleuzian-*gauchisme* and Spinozian-autonomism, Heideggerian deconstructionism and Foucauldian biopolitics, I will conclude by recalling an important concept at the center of Italian thought since the late seventies: the “unpolitical”.

In a recent essay [*La politica al presente*, Mimesis, 2008], 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 ” (14).

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). His 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 unprecedented spaces of action and theoretical invention that the recent developments of biopolitics are creatively addressing.

The term "unpolitical" has been introduced in the Italian context by a 1978 essay on *Nietzsche and the Unpolitical* by Massimo Cacciari [this text is now available in English in a Fordham UP collection of essays by Cacciari: *The Unpolitical. On the Radical Critique of Political Reason*, 2009]. Here Cacciari, following a Schmittian decisionist reading of Nietzsche's "grand politics", 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. Starting with a 1988 volume entitled *Categorie dell'impolitico* [the English translation is forthcoming from Fordham University Press], Roberto Esposito has attempted a revision of this concept that culminates in 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, modified).

While the modern tradition of political philosophy, from Hobbes to Hegel, from Kant to Habermas, aims at neutralizing and regulating tensions and divergences, the Machiavellian and 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 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 kind of universalism. On the contrary, the unpolitical mastery of conflict embraces Nietzsche’s uncompromising anti-Europeism and cult of the “Outside”, a crucial re-orientation of Western political thought that it’s the source of the “political Orientalism” of Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, and Roland Barthes – I am thinking, for instance, at Deleuze’s “nomadic war machine”, at the Foucauldian “*ars erotica*”, and at Barthes’ “Tao political minimalism”.

Thanks to its weak liberal tradition and dysfunctional State organization, the Italian anomaly has offered the chance to observe through a magnifying glass the biopolitical convulsions of Western societies. Hopefully, the grim profile of the “empty signifier” Berlusconi – his populist hypnotization of “the people” and hegemonic reconciliation of interests and demands – is not the fatal offspring of the Italian anomaly. Behind this eclipse of liberal democracy, unpredictable and unpolitical conflicts foreshadow 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.