

# What Is Left of the (Italian) Left?

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Today the left finds itself in the dangerous but extraordinary condition of being called to reinvent and rethink its role, to open, and experiment with, new spaces of possibilities. As Slavoj Žižek writes in the long introduction to a selection of Lenin's writings, this means working through past historical events – in particular failures – to reproduce the coordinates of the left's project of emancipation.<sup>1</sup> This should recover from the past and adapt to the present the historical purpose of the left with the aim of breaking with forms of subaltern thinking that have hindered the redefinition of the political space in the context of the global economic and social transformations.

In his last book "La lunga eclissi. Passato e presente del dramma della sinistra",<sup>2</sup> Achille Occhetto - the last PCI<sup>3</sup> secretary and first secretary of PDS<sup>4</sup>, a national party born after the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 - writes that we are facing an unrecognisable political

landscape, similar to a tidal wave that has submerged almost all the political forces of the 20th century, in particular the left, both in its multifarious forms, from the most reformist to the most radical one.<sup>5</sup> The outcome of the last general elections in Italy (4 March 2018) produced a political landscape that confirms a process that – apart from a few exceptions – seems to be global and systemic.

The crisis of the Italian and European left<sup>6</sup> is partly the outcome of the intellectual and political difficulty of confronting the historical changes and social transformations of the last decades. It has produced a subordinate position towards the hegemony of the neoliberal consensus, which has prevented the left from evaluating the social and cultural effects this consensus has on its traditional constituency and the emerging new social subjects. According to Paolo Flores d'Arcais, the hegemony of neoliberal thought and practices has been realised to some extent because the left betrayed

its mandate by accepting as inevitable the economic-financial paradigm imposed by the forces of capitalism. Thus, the European left has become complicit in a system that tolerated reformist political activism only as long as it was willing to stay within a well-defined ideological horizon with the goal of co-opting the left's constituencies.<sup>7</sup> If we interpret the crisis of the left within this framework, it must be read as the product of a process of social and economic transformation starting in the 1970s. As stated by the philosopher Massimo Cacciari, we are facing an epochal transition, which requires re-thinking and re-reading key words such as left, democracy, people, and values.<sup>8</sup> Calling things by their real name and remodelling their meaning is the indispensable precondition for articulating a new project for the left.

### Back to the Future

Since the birth of fascism, Italy has often been labelled a political test case, a laboratory anticipating political tendencies and transformations elsewhere. In this perspective, we have to consider the birth of *Forza Italia* and 'Berlusconism' at the beginning of the 1990s, a successful political project rhetorically based on redeeming the power of the self-made man and taunting professional politicians. Today this anomaly reappears in the form of what the philosopher Mario Tronti, a leading protagonist of the political debate of the

last 50 years, defines as the rise of the self-declared common man in power.

According to Tronti, in the first years after the end of the Second World War, the democratic political system, based on great mass parties like the PCI (Italian Communist Party) and the DC (Christian Democracy), was able to get rid of the *Uomo Qualunque*<sup>9</sup> movement within a short time thanks to the ability to represent, despite strong ideological differences, the needs of the subaltern classes and to shape the processes of a general modernisation of Italian society.<sup>10</sup> It was only after the fall of fascism and the adoption of the new institutional system based on the 1948 Constitution, that a pluralist approach was adopted; this provided forms of decentralised participation through the formation of democratic political institutions at the regional, provincial, and municipal level, based on a stable party system and a strictly proportional electoral system.<sup>11</sup>

After the great workers' struggles cycle of the 1960s and 1970s, the emancipatory and modernising function of the left seemed to decline due to its inability to understand the profound processes of social reorganisation brought on by the transformation of capitalism. As Hardt and Negri underline, in the last fifty years the primary site of production has shifted from the factory to society. Automation, information technology and financialisation conjured

to create new social relations and new subjectivities.<sup>12</sup> The political cultures inspired by the communist and socialist tradition – as well as the popular Catholic one – played a diminishing role as centres of ideological aggregation and identity building, giving way to accentuated forms of individualism linked to the new forms of consumption and the transformation of the labour market.<sup>13</sup>

Until then, the strongest communist party of the western world had been the main driving force of the social and civil transformation of the country, a force which ruled in several regions of the nation and most of the main metropolitan areas, imposing a specific form of cultural and ideological hegemony that distinguished it profoundly from its brotherly parties. The *Communist Party* and its allies usually gained around 40 to 45 per cent of the votes and managed to build a consensus that transcended class boundaries and integrated vast sectors of the middle classes and the entrepreneurial class. The electoral peak of the Italian left coincided with the general elections of June 1976, when the whole of the Italian left gathered about 46 to 47 per cent of the votes with the *Communist Party* at about 35 per cent.

It is one of the paradoxes of history that the difficulties of the Italian left began at that very moment. The left failed to understand the structural economic transformation driven

by the crisis of the Fordist mode of production, the gradual financialisation of capital and the globalisation of the markets. This transformation changed the social structure of the country and led to a gradual weakening of the cultural and social fabric on which the left had built its success.

The inability to fully understand the structural changes was evident in strategic choices made by the main party of the left, the PCI: between 1973 and 1979 it passed from the so-called ‘historical compromise’ (an agreement of government with the DC) to the proposal of a ‘democratic alternative’ (re-proposing an alliance with the socialist area). Moreover, the attempt to imagine a ‘third way’, a nebulous proposal that aimed to overcome both the European model of social democracy and Soviet socialism, was an additional supplement to this political deadlock.<sup>14</sup> Some historical events are still indicative of this difficulty in grasping the depth of these structural changes.

In the midst of a long and fierce labour dispute in FIAT, the success of the so-called ‘march of the forty thousand’, a public protest organised by white-collar workers and managerial cadres of the automotive industry in Turin in October 1980, symbolically marked the end of an era and the beginning of a process of marginalisation of the workers unions. At the time, few observers understood

the historical range of this defeat and the fact that it was the harbinger of the profound restructuring process of industrial and trade union relations as well as the start of restructuring programmes of the production apparatus that would eventually lead to the end of the traditional Fordist factory.<sup>15</sup>

A few years later, in 1985, a referendum initiated by the PCI and the CGIL, the largest workers union, against cutting the so-called 'scala mobile' (a state controlled mechanism to automatically update the salaries to the inflation rate), was clearly defeated, which further signalled both the fracture within the left on this and other issues related to economic and industrial policies and the unexpected change of feeling in a large part of public opinion on industrial relations and development.<sup>16</sup> The decline of the Italian left and its main protagonist, the PCI, was also symbolically represented in the dramatic death in 1984 of the party's secretary general, Enrico Berlinguer. Suffering from a stroke at a rally in Padua during the election campaign for the European Parliament, he died a few days later. More than one million activists attended his public funeral in Rome, an event of historical significance that seemed to close an era and perhaps brought together for the last time what had been the communist people. Radical social, political and

cultural transformations determined largely by the new models of labour market organisation were imposing their effects on the part of society traditionally linked to the left. The appearance and spread of new models of industrial production and organisation of work, defined as 'molecular capitalism', 'family capitalism' or the 'people of the VAT ID numbers'<sup>17</sup>, led to the emergence of new social subjectivities that the left failed to understand and then to intercept.<sup>18</sup>

The incubation of the crisis of the left exploded in all its virulence in 2008 and caused what Tronti defines as the mutation of the left political élite, a mutation that is retrospectively understood and explained by Massimo D'Alema<sup>19</sup> in a long critical reflection. He claims that

[...] the liberal-socialist vision has proved to be largely illusory and that reformism has been crushed between the weight of the global economy and the markets and the limited possibility of action of political institutions that have remained largely national.<sup>20</sup>

Again Tronti's reflection recalls how the failure to grasp the oppressive and predatory character of financial and neoliberal capitalism made it impossible to find

[...] the [...] way that went beyond the great history of the labour movement, without repeating it and without forgetting it: assuming the inheritance to invest it in a new, always alternative

enterprise. [...] It was legitimate to think of a temporary middle way between capitalism and socialism but not only to manage the first one, rather ruling it, to use it for other purposes that gradually should overcome it.<sup>21</sup>

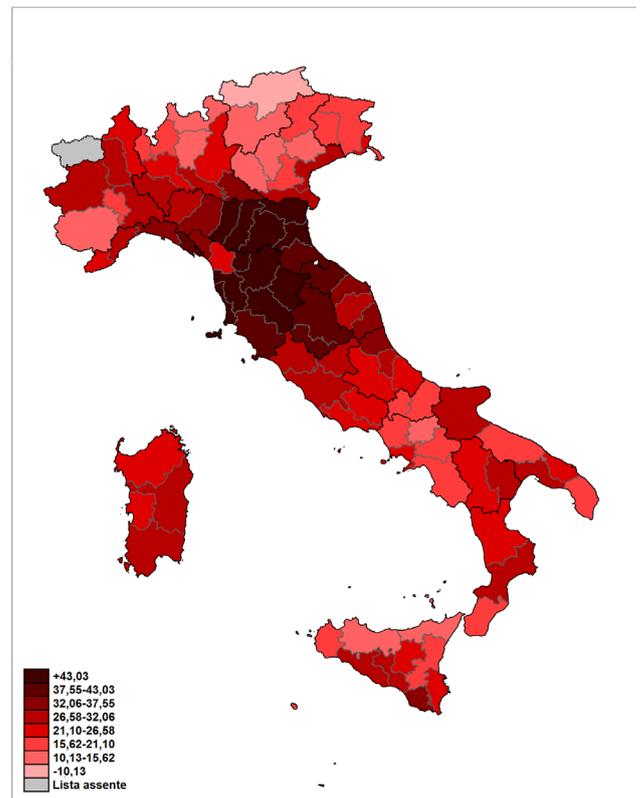
In this sense the fall of the Berlin Wall not only represented the traumatic closure of the communist experience, it has also meant the acceleration of the end of the social-democratic and reformist experiment, of the thirty-year period of the welfare state project (at least in most of Western Europe).

From that moment on, from the PCI's traumatic congress of dissolution of 1991, that led to a split with the party's far-left wing and the name change to PDS, the Italian anomaly began to give birth to movements and political parties constructed around nationalist, xenophobic and populist contents. In this context, the Italian left pursued a strategy that prioritised governability with the illusion of being able to somehow control these developments. In essence, the Italian left limited itself to following the processes of globalisation and financialisation of the economy from a position of complicity and failed to develop a political and cultural alternative. The underestimation of the contradictions and social costs imposed by economic-financial globalisation produced a response both insufficient and suicidal in pursuing a technocratic management model as the

only possibility of political action.<sup>22</sup>

### The Roots of the Defeat

Since the mid-nineties the figures for the electoral losses of both the European and Italian left seem indicative of a relentless decline in every election. Throughout the previous period, most Western European left-wing parties in all their ideological articulations (from centre-left reformism to far-left radicalism) settled steadily at least around



Distribution of the vote to the PCI in the 1987 political elections

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40 per cent of the votes, in some cases even exceeding this figure by 6 to 7 points.<sup>23</sup> In the Italian case, this peak was reached in the general elections of 1976 when the sum of the left-wing parties, with the overwhelming prevalence of the PCI,

reached about 46 per cent of the votes and then settled steadily at around 40 per cent until the beginning of the Nineties.

Since the first general elections of 1948 the *Italian Communist Party* has always scored above 20 per cent, reaching its highest level of votes in the 1976 general elections (34.4 per cent). After the dramatic turn determined by the events of 1989/91, the new political subject born from the ashes of the PCI (in all its declinations and acronyms, that is: PDS, DS and PD) never succeeded in repeating these results and indeed showed a trend towards a steady decrease in the percentage of votes it gathered at the ballot boxes. Despite the noteworthy exception of the 2014 European elections, when the PD received 40 per cent of the votes (but in the context of a very low turnout), the heir of the *Communist Party* mustered only 18.8 per cent of the votes in the 2018 general elections – a decrease of around 8 per cent compared to those of 2013. Further, the crisis of the Italian left is confirmed by the disappointing results of other smaller radical left-wing parties such as *Potere al Popolo* (Power to the People), LEU *Liberi e Uguali* (Free and Equal), SEL *Sinistra e Libertà* (Left and Freedom), RC *Rifondazione Comunista* (Party of the Communist Refoundation). From approximately 32.3 million valid votes, the sum of those cast for the Italian left-wing parties reached a

disappointing 7.3 million.<sup>24</sup> According to analysis of the electoral flows of the 2018 elections, the voters abandoning the PD were mainly channelled towards the 5-Star Movement and to a lesser extent to the League or abstained, while only a residual part moved towards the other leftist parties.<sup>25</sup> These surveys show that a conspicuous part of the traditionally left-wing Italian electorate chose to support those movements and parties labelled as „populist“ as a way to punish the left-wing parties for their inability or unwillingness to address the electorate’s social needs and discomfort. In this respect, it is evident that we are facing a problem of representation of both the traditional working classes and those social groups (temporary workers, the underemployed, youngsters and unemployed intellectuals), that are the products of the transformation of the social relations according to the needs of the globalised markets. The *Democratic Party* lost approximately 50 per cent of its share of votes between 2008 and 2018, decreasing from a maximum of 12 million to a minimum of 6 million votes. As a consequence, the *Democratic Party* and the other left-wing subjects risk confining themselves to those cosmopolitan middle- and upper-class metropolitan urban enclaves which showed greater dynamism and resilience in response to the economic crisis.<sup>26</sup> Again the analysis of electoral flows underline this transformation, pointing

out how the propensity to vote for the left increases in accordance with the growth of personal income.<sup>27</sup> The difficulty of intercepting and representing those social groups suffering from deep social insecurity is a consequence of the lack of commitment to the traditional themes of the left such as unemployment, job shortages, minimum wages, or welfare. For these groups, the political approach of the M5S appears more credible and less prone to the technocratic recipes and the politics of sacrifice that are perceived as unfair and imposed by a distant European bureaucracy. In addition, the impact of the issues of globalisation and immigration, which appear key factors in mobilising the Italian public opinion and feeding public discourses, has been underestimated by the left,

which has failed to offer a credible narrative in order to grasp the anxieties and concerns many citizens share.

### The Wings of Hope – What Is to Be Done?

The contemporary conjuncture, characterised by the powerful resurfacing of aggressive reactionary thinking and spreading of isolationist and nationalist politics, opens spaces of resistance and opposition toward the proliferation of such new forms of cultural and ideological conservatism.

In a long editorial, published in the daily newspaper *la Repubblica*, the former editor and writer, Ezio Mauro, observes the failure to understand and interpret the metamorphosis and transformation



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of the social body as the main reason leading to the catastrophe of the March 2018 general elections. He writes:

The lack of a strong commitment to change and of a visionary political project hinders the transformation of the political and cultural identity of the left. The left appears unable to find the words to speak to a dispersed and disappointed people who are waiting for a political project and a leadership ready to propose an alternative to the ferocious, selfish and amateurish image of Italy the government in charge proposes every day with its actions and decisions.<sup>28</sup>

Showing similar disenchanted and worried feelings, Achille Occhetto reflects upon the narrow horizons in which this debate is confined, indicating the short temporal perspective as one of its limitations. He underlines that we should insist on a radical reflection beginning with the collapse of the great narratives of the 20th century and their failure if we want to identify the reasons for the disillusionment and distancing of a part of society that manifests itself in confused and disoriented ways. Occhetto insists on the need to recover the abandoned and disappointed people and to accept the challenge to build a new idea of political involvement inviting, and experimenting with, different forms of activism, militancy and participation.<sup>29</sup> The lack of vision of the left, a political subject stubbornly obsessed with good governance principles and bureaucratic technicalities, has allowed

the spread of what Fabio Vighi defines as

[t]he metastatic growth of populism [...], a metastasis functional to the maintenance of the domination of capital in its financial form which, through the various forms of 'populism', depoliticises the social struggles by creating and nurturing the invention of an external enemy, be it the immigrant, multiculturalism, technocracies.<sup>30</sup>

According to Vighi's radical interpretation, the crisis of the left can be solved only by rearticulating the proper political dimension to the wide spectrum of social struggles, which are symptomatic of the inherent contradictions of the current form of capitalism. This means the radical transformation of the left's mentality to achieve a break with the relationship of subordination to neoliberalism and the policies of austerity and sacrifices, and to accept the challenge posed by populism and the 'populist' political platforms. It means addressing issues that once again should become part of the identity of the left, such as basic income (or whatever you might call it), labour rights, defence and improvement of civil and social rights, and a renewed relationship with the European Union. Ernesto Laclau's thesis that all political discourse has a populist dimension implies that the left has to abandon a narrow vision of populism and cease to consider populism as a symptom of a disease to be morally condemned rather

than a political subject with its own political dimension to be fought on the political level. The 'trap of populism', in which the left seems imprisoned, makes it difficult to bring back politics in its antagonistic dimension, reconstructing a politics of representation of the interests of collectivities as well as a different meaning of the word 'people'. Among other things, it means rejecting the illusory creation of the people as a phantasmal figure opposed to an 'other' equally ghostly and elusive (the élite, finance, bureaucratic technocracies, immigrants), and a radically diverse definition of people, one constructed inside the concrete social relations and affiliations. In this regard, the philosopher and communist Mario Tronti states, referring to the history of the mass parties of the second half of the 20th century, that "[s]ince there were people, there was no populism. If anything, today we have populism because there are no people."<sup>31</sup> This disappearance coincides with the abandonment of the traditional concept of social classes and the lack of understanding of the emergence of new subjectivities whose social composition has dramatically changed and escaped the usual patterns of interpretation. These subjectivities are the product of the new form the capitalist relations assumed outside the traditional factory system. This mistake has been exacerbated by embracing the neoliberal and individualist ideology, determining

the closure of each antagonistic space and all possibility of social transformation, instead of imagining an 'other' beyond the logic of capitalism. Together with the ability to imagine possible futures, heating the hearts and minds of its people, above all the left has lost its memory, symbols and myths.

Criticism of the grand ideological narratives of the 20th century has fuelled the perception that left and right have disappeared. In reality this is the result of an ideological operation leading to acceptance of the neoliberal code as the only legitimate source of construction of the present. There is no doubt that the crisis of the left also derives from this catastrophic cultural subordination that paved the way to the hegemony of the right-wing ideology in forms which gave new meanings to old narratives and successfully reintroduced in the popular the debate on nation, sovereignty, national identity and belonging. Today, the term 'left' has lost its vocation to convey the idea of a possible beyond, a vision of a world with more equal and just social and political structures. It is worth remembering the dramatic rupture that occurred between the left and the world of labour in a phase of profound and radical transformation. Maurizio Landini, the Secretary-General of the CGIL<sup>32</sup> (the largest Italian trade union representing over 6 million members), recognises in the rupture the effects of the

political and cultural isolation of the left and underlines the necessity to respond – thinking of new forms of representation – to the need for participation that emerges from the forms of labour created by neoliberal capitalism, producing new subjectivities among people who are often deprived of guarantees and rights.<sup>33</sup> The political void opened by the lack of a radical transformative project has been filled by political forces that have imposed narratives which reject mediation and delegitimise the function of intermediate bodies, offering instead forms of authoritarian management supported by the search for a direct relationship with the masses, recreating that irrational relationship which paved the way to fascism.

If, following Nicholas DeGenova's argument, populism pretends to be the true expression and voice of the people as opposed to an imagined other, then the left is called to counter such a project of redefining social antagonism because it tries to hide the real forms and sources of inequalities and injustice constitutive of the social order.<sup>34</sup> An ambitious left-wing political programme would start with the reconstruction of a collective horizon based on new forms of agency, participation and organisation of public life. In one of his most recent essays, Lawrence Grossberg suggests that in these hard times, characterised by anger, fear and desperation and by the shifting

of the balance of forces in favour of a conservative and reactionary hegemony undermining the "[...] progressive desires for a more human, just and equitable world"<sup>35</sup> we are asked to articulate different maps of knowledge in order to oppose the present conjuncture. The word 'left' sounds hollow and feeble: while the right imposes its political agenda based on a set of strong issues, the left appears voiceless and unable to give new form to its values and tradition. If we want to understand what has happened in the last decades, and renew the tools to transform the present and stop the spread of the right, it is necessary to begin with a semantic shift, ceasing to call 'left' what is not 'left'. It means to invent a new vocabulary in order to fill this cultural and ideological void and to reopen the space of utopian possibilities, that is to construct and give form to the possibility of radical change.

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