

An Invertebrate Left - on Italy's Squandered Heritage

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The Italian left was once the largest and most impressive popular movement for social change in Western Europe. Comprising two mass parties, each with its own history and culture, and each committed not to ameliorating but to overcoming capitalism, the postwar alliance between Socialists and Communists, the PSI and PCI, did not survive the boom of the 1950s. In 1963, Pietro Nenni took the Socialists into government for the first time as junior partners of the Christian Democrats, on a path that would ultimately lead to Bettino Craxi, leaving Italian Communism in unchallenged command of opposition to the Christian Democrat regime. From the beginning, the PCI had been organisationally and ideologically the stronger of the two, with a wider mass base – more than two million members by the mid-1950s, extending from peasants in the South through artisans and teachers in the middle of the country to industrial workers in the North. It also had a richer intellectual heritage, in Gramsci's newly published *Prison Notebooks*, whose significance was immediately recognised well beyond the party. At its height, the PCI could draw on an extraordinary range of social and moral energies, combining both deeper popular roots and broader intellectual influence than any other force in the country.

Confined by the Cold War to forty years of national opposition, the party entrenched itself in local and later regional administrations, and in the parliamentary commissions through which Italian legislation must pass, becoming entwined with the ruling order at many secondary levels. But its underlying strategy remained more or less stable throughout. After 1948, the spoils of the Liberation were divided. Power fell to the DC; culture to the PCI. Christian Democracy controlled the levers of the state, Communism attracted the talents of civil society. The PCI's ability to polarise Italian intellectual life around itself, not only in a broad arc of scholars, writers, thinkers and artists but a general climate of progressive opinion, was without parallel elsewhere in Europe. Thanks in part to the sociology of its leadership, which unlike that of the French, German, British or Spanish Communist Parties, was for the most part highly educated, and in part to a relatively tolerant and flexible handling of the 'battle of ideas', its dominion in this sphere was the really distinctive asset of Italian Communism. But it came at a twofold price to which the party remained persistently blind.

For the extent of the PCI's influence across the world of thought and art was also a function of the degree to which it assimilated and reproduced the dominant strain in a pre-existent Italian culture of long standing. This was the idealism which had found its most powerful, though by no means unique modern expression in the philosophy of Benedetto Croce, a figure who over the years had acquired an almost Goethe-like position in the intellectual life of the country. It was Croce's historicist system, its prestige underwritten by the attention given it in prison by Gramsci, that became naturalised as the circumambient ether of a great deal of the postwar Italian culture over which the PCI, directly or indirectly, presided. But behind it lay much older traditions that accorded pre-eminence to the realm of ideas, conceived as will or understanding, in politics. Between the fall of the Roman Empire and the completion of the Risorgimento, Italy never knew a peninsular state or aristocracy, and most of the time was subject to an array of conflicting foreign powers. The result, for long stretches, was to create an overwhelming sense of the gap between past glory and present misery among its educated elites. From Dante onwards, there developed a tradition of intellectuals with a strong sense of their calling to recover and transmit the high culture of classical antiquity, and imbued with the

conviction that the country could be put to rights only by the impress of revivifying ideas, of which only they could be the artificers, on fallen realities. Culture was not a sphere distinct from power: it was to be the passport to it.

In good measure, Italian Communism inherited this habit of mind. The novel form it gave to a national predisposition was drawn from, if not faithful to, Gramsci. In this version, 'hegemony' was a cultural and moral ascendancy to be won consensually within civil society, as the real foundation of social existence, which could eventually assure peaceful possession of the state, a more external and superficial expression of collective life. On this view, the commanding position the party had won in the intellectual arena showed it was on track to ultimate political victory. This was not what Gramsci had believed. A revolutionary of the Third International, he had never thought capital could be broken without force of arms, however important the need to win the widest popular consent for the overthrow of the ruling order. But it fitted the idealist cast of the culture at large. Within the intellectual sphere itself, moreover, the PCI reproduced the humanist bias of the traditional elites, for whom philosophy, history and literature had always been the fields of choice. Missing from the party's portfolio were the more modern disciplines of economics and sociology, and the methods they had attempted to borrow, for better or worse, from the natural sciences. Formidable though its positions looked at the heights of a hallowed cultural hierarchy, it was weaker lower down, with serious consequences in due course.

For when the two great changes that would alter the ecology of the PCI in postwar Italy hit the party, it was quite unprepared. The first was the arrival of a fully commercialised mass culture, of a kind still unimaginable in the world of Togliatti, let alone of Gramsci. Even in its heyday, there had been certain obvious limits to the influence of the PCI, and more generally of the Italian left, in the cultural scene, since the Church occupied such a large space in popular belief and imagination. Below the level of the universities, publishers, studios or journals in which the movance of the party was so widespread, and distinct from the strongholds of the liberal bourgeois establishment in the press, an undergrowth of conformist magazines or shows tailored to the middle or lowbrow tastes of DC voters had always flourished. From its vantage-points in the elite culture, the PCI could view this universe with tolerant condescension, as expressions of the legacy of a clerical past whose importance Gramsci had long stressed. It was not threatened by it.

The inrush of a completely secular, fully Americanised mass culture was another matter. Caught unprepared, the party's apparatus and the intelligentsia that had formed around it were knocked sideways. Although critical engagement with pulp was not lacking in Italy - Umberto Eco was a pioneer - the PCI failed to connect. No creative dialectic, capable of resisting the blows of the new by transforming relations between the high and low, materialised. The case of the cinema, where Italy had above all excelled after the war, can be taken as emblematic. There was no relay of the generation of great directors - Rossellini, Visconti, Antonioni - who had made their debut in the 1940s or early 1950s, and whose last important works cluster in the early 1960s. Missing thereafter was any combustible crossing of avant-garde with popular forms to compare with Godard in France or Fassbinder in Germany; later on, only the weak brew of Nanni Moretti. The result was a gap so large between educated and popular sensibilities that the country was left more or less defenceless against the cultural counter-revolution of Berlusconi's television empire, saturating the popular imaginary with a tidal wave of the crassest idiocies and fantasies - schlock so wretched the very term would be too kind for them. Unable to confront or turn the change, for a decade the PCI sought to resist it. The party's last real leader, Enrico Berlinguer, personified austere contempt for the self-indulgence and infantilism of the new universe of cultural and material consumption. After he had gone, the step from unbending refusal to gushing capitulation was a short one - Walter Veltroni coming to resemble a beaming picture-card out of the schoolboys' albums he made his name distributing with copies of *Unità*, when he became editor of the paper.

If the PCI's idealism disabled it from grasping the material drives of the market and media that transformed leisure in Italy, the same lack of economic or sociological antennae prevented it from detecting no less decisive changes in the workplace. Already by the turn of the 1960s, it was paying less attention to these than the levy of young radicals who would go on to produce the peculiarly Italian phenomenon of *operaismo*, one of the strangest intellectual adventures of the European left of the period. [1] Unlike the PCI, the postwar PSI had possessed at least one major figure, Rodolfo Morandi, whose Marxism was of a less idealist cast, focused on the structures of Italian industry, of which he was the author of a famous study. In the next generation, he found a gifted successor in Raniero Panzieri, a PSI militant who, having shifted to Turin, started to investigate the condition of factory workers in the Fiat plants, gathering round his enterprise a group of younger intellectuals, many (Antonio Negri among them) but not all originally from Socialist youth organisations. Over the next decade, *operaismo* developed into a protean force, throwing up a succession of seminal, if short-lived journals – *Quaderni rossi*, *Classe operaia*, *Gatto selvaggio*, *Contropiano* – exploring the transformations of labour and industrial capital in contemporary Italy. The PCI had nothing comparable to show, and paid scant attention to this ebullition, even though at this stage the most influential of the new theorists was a youngster from its own ranks in Rome, Mario Tronti. This was a milieu whose culture was essentially foreign to the party, indeed declaratively hostile to Gramsci, taxed with spiritualism and populism.

The impact of *operaismo* came not just from the inquiries or ideas of its thinkers, but their connection with the upsurge of new contingents of the working class: young immigrants from the South, rebelling against low wages and oppressive conditions in Northern factories – not to speak of Communist-led unions disconcerted by spontaneous outbreaks of militancy or unexpected forms of struggle. To have anticipated this turbulence gave *operaismo* a powerful intellectual headwind. But it also fixated it on the moment of its original insight, leading to a romanticisation of proletarian revolt as a more or less continuous flow of lava from the factory floor. By the mid-1970s, aware that Italian industry was changing once again, and workshop militancy was in decline, Negri and others would fall back on the figure of 'social labour' in general – virtually anyone employed, or unemployed, wherever, by capital – as the bearer of immanent revolution. The abstraction of this notion was a sign of desperation, and the apocalyptic politics that accompanied it took this wing of *operaismo* into a dead end by the late 1970s. The PCI, however, after missing the mutation of the 1960s, had not learned from it, and offered nothing better by way of an industrial sociology. So it was that when the Italian economy underwent further, critical changes in the 1980s, with the rise of small export firms and a black economy – the 'second Italian miracle', as it was hopefully referred to at the time – the party was unprepared again, and this time the blow to its standing as the political representative of the collective labourer proved fatal. Twenty years later, just as the triumph of Forza Italia would dramatise its failure to react in time to intervene in the massification of popular culture, so the victories of the Northern League would reveal its inability to respond in time to the fragmentation of postmodern labour.

These were deficits of a *mentalité* with deeper sources than the party's Marxism, a classical sense of intellectual values that for all its limitations was in its own fashion rarely less than honourable, often admirable. There was another and more damaging side to the same idealism, however, that was specific to Italian Communism, and for which it bore conscious political responsibility. This was a strategic reflex that never really altered from the Liberation onwards, and whose after-twitches continue today. When Togliatti returned from Moscow to Salerno in spring 1944, he made it clear to his party that there could be no attempt at making a socialist revolution in Italy on the heels of the expulsion of the Wehrmacht, already foreseeable. The Resistance in the North, in which the PCI was playing a leading role, could supplement but not substitute the Anglo-American armies in the South as the main force to drive the Germans out of the country, and it was the Allied High Command that would call the shots once peace was restored. After twenty years of repression and exile, the task of

the PCI was to build a mass party and play a central role in an elected assembly to put Italy on a new democratic basis.

This was a realistic reading of the balance of forces in the peninsula, and of the determination of Washington and London not to permit any assault on capital in the wake of German defeat. A postwar insurrection was not on the agenda. Togliatti, however, went much further than this. In Italy, the monarchy which helped install, and then comfortably cohabited with Fascism, had ousted Mussolini in the summer of 1943, fearful of going down with him after the Allies landed in Sicily. After a brief interval, the king fled with Badoglio, the conqueror of Ethiopia, to the South, where the Allies put them atop an unaltered regional administration, while in the North the Germans set up Mussolini at the head of a puppet regime in Salò. When the war came to an end, Italy was thus not treated like Germany, as a defeated power, but as a chastened 'co-belligerent'. Once the Allied troops were gone, a coalition government, comprising the left-liberal Partito d'Azione, Socialists, Communists and Christian Democrats was faced with the legacy of Fascism, and the monarchy that had collaborated with it. The Christian Democrats, aware that their potential voters remained loyal to the monarchy, and recognising that their natural supports in the state apparatus had been the routine instruments of Fascism, were resolved to prevent anything comparable to German de-Nazification. But they were in a minority in the cabinet, where the secular left held more posts.

At this juncture the PCI, instead of putting the DC on the defensive by pressing for an uncompromising purge of the state – cleaning out all senior collaborationist officials in the bureaucracy, judiciary, army and police – invited it to head the government, and lifted scarcely a finger to dismantle the traditional apparatus of Mussolini's rule. So far from isolating Christian Democracy, Togliatti manoeuvred to put its leader, De Gasperi, at the head of the government, and then joined with the DC – to the indignation of the Socialists – in confirming the Lateran Pacts that Mussolini had sealed with the Vatican. The prefects, judges and policemen who had served the Duce were left virtually untouched. As late as 1960, 62 out of 64 prefects had been minions of Fascism, and all 135 of the country's police chiefs. As for judges and officers, the unreconstructed courts acquitted the torturers of the regime and convicted the partisans who had fought against them, retrospectively declaring combatants of the Fascist Republic of Salò legitimate belligerents, and those of the Resistance illegitimate – the latter hence liable to summary execution after 1943, without penal sanctions for the former after 1945. These enormities were a direct consequence of the actions of the PCI. It was Togliatti himself who, as minister of justice, promulgated in June 1946 the amnesty that enabled them. A year later, the party was rewarded with an unceremonious ejection from the government by De Gasperi, who no longer had need of it.

The postwar history of Italy was thus to be entirely unlike that of Germany, where there had been no popular Resistance. Nazism was destroyed by both the extremity of military defeat, and the uprooting of the subsequent Allied occupations. In the Federal Republic, Fascism could never raise its head again. In Italy, by contrast, the Resistance bequeathed an ideology of – patriotic – anti-Fascism, whose ubiquitous official rhetoric, in which the PCI took the lead, covered the actual continuities of Fascism, both as an inherited apparatus of laws and officials, and as an openly proclaimed creed and movement. Reconstituted as the MSI, the Fascist party was soon sitting in Parliament again, and eventually received into the establishment under its leader, Giorgio Almirante. Exalting Mussolini's anti-semitic laws, this figure had told his compatriots in 1938 that 'racism is the vastest and bravest re-cognition of itself that Italy has ever attempted,' and in 1944, after Mussolini had been airlifted north by the Germans, that if they did not enlist as fighters for the Republic of Salò, they would be shot in the back. When Almirante died in the 1980s, Togliatti's widow was among the mourners at the funeral. Today Gianfranco Fini, his appointed heir, is speaker of the Chamber of Deputies, and probable successor to Berlusconi as prime minister.

Beyond the obvious reproaches to this trajectory, what is most damning in the PCI's part in it is its

self-destructive futility. When it had a chance to weaken Christian Democracy by sinking the sword of an intransigent anti-Fascism into its flanks, to cut it away from the reactionary constituencies that had sustained Mussolini's regime, it did just the opposite, helping the DC to establish itself as the dominant force in the country, by passing a lenifying sponge across collaboration with the regime. In so doing, it simply consolidated the conservative bloc under clerical command that would shut it out of power till its dying day. In this debacle, the party's conduct was without international excuse. Revolution may have been ruled out in postwar Italy, but by 1946 the Allies had essentially left the country, and were in no position to halt a lustration of Fascism. Togliatti's naivety in being so completely outmanœuvred by De Gasperi had little to do with external influences. It was rooted in a strategic conception he had derived from Gramsci, interpreted through the gauze of Croce and his forebears. The pursuit of political power, Gramsci had written, required two kinds of strategy, whose terms he took from military theory, a war of position and a war of manœuvre: trench or siege warfare, as against mobile assault. The Russian Revolution had exemplified the second; a revolution in the West would, for a considerable period, require the former, before eventually passing over to the latter. Just as it had diluted Gramsci's notion of hegemony simply to its consensual moment, fixing it essentially in civil society, so under Togliatti the PCI reduced his conception of political strategy to a war of position only, the slow acquisition of influence in civil society, as if no war of manœuvre – the ambush, sudden charge, rapidly wheeling attack, catching class enemies or the state by surprise – were any longer needed in the West. In 1946-47, De Gasperi and his colleagues did not make the same mistake.

By 1948 the popular élan of Liberation was broken. The onset of the Cold War brought electoral defeat and it was twenty years before another wave of political insurgency crested in Italy. When it came, the generational rebellion of the late 1960s, embracing both students and young workers, went deeper and lasted longer than anywhere else in Europe. Under Togliatti's successor, Luigi Longo, somewhat more of a fighter and less of a diplomat, the PCI did not react as negatively to the youth revolt as the PCF in France. But nor did it respond creatively, failing either to connect with a culture of the streets in which high and low – the classics of the Marxist and Bolshevik past, the graffiti of the spray-can present – for a time interacted dynamically, or to renew its increasingly stationary stock of strategic concepts. When critical opposition to its inertia emerged within the party in the shape of the *Manifesto* group – more genuinely Gramscian in outlook, and of much greater political intelligence than the operaisti outside it – the PCI leadership lost no time in expelling it.

The excommunication came over the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, which the *Manifesto* condemned without reservation. Here, alongside the native idealism of its formation, lay the second reason for the continuing strategic paralysis of Italian Communism. However flexible in other respects, the PCI remained Stalinist in both its internal structures and its external ties to the Soviet state. Despairing of one-party rule by a torpid Christian Democracy, liberal well-wishers of the party – of which there were to be many over the years – would time and again express admiration for the PCI's sensible domestic moderation, yet exasperation that it should compromise this otherwise excellent record by its links to the USSR and the organisational norms that followed from it. In reality, the two were structurally interrelated. From Salerno onwards, the party's moderation was a compensation for its relations with Moscow, not a contradiction of them. Just because it could always be taxed with a suspect kinship to the land of the October Revolution, it had to over-prove its innocence of any wish to emulate that all too famous model of change. The burden of an imputed guilt and the quest for an exonerating respectability went hand in hand. The party's most outspoken right-winger, the formidable Giorgio Amendola, warning it against any toleration of the student revolt, while regularly repairing to Bulgaria for his family holidays, personified the mechanisms of this dualism.

Incapable of assuming or developing the revolts of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the PCI turned instead once again towards Christian Democracy, in the wistful hope that the DC had changed its ways and would now be prepared to collaborate with it in governing the country – Catholicism and Communism uniting in a ‘historic compromise’ to defend Italian democracy against the dangers of subversion and the temptations of consumerism. Proposing this pact in 1973 soon after he became the new leader of the party, Berlinguer invoked the example of Chile, where Allende had just been overthrown, as a warning of the civil war that risked breaking out, were the left – Communists and Socialists combined – ever to try to rule the country on the basis of a mere arithmetical majority of the electorate. Few arguments could have been more obviously specious. There was not the faintest prospect of civil war in Italy, where even such outbreaks of violence as had occurred – the bomb planted by right-wing terrorists in the Piazza Fontana in Milan in 1969 was the worst case – had little incidence on the political life of the country as a whole. But once the PCI had moved to embrace the DC, the revolutionary groups to the left of it that had sprung out of the youth rebellion foresaw the emergence of a monolithic parliamentary establishment, government without opposition, and shifted towards direct action against it. The first lethal attacks by the Red Brigades began the following year.

But the political system was in no danger. The elections of 1976, in which the PCI did well, were perfectly tranquil. In their wake, the DC graciously accepted Communist support for governments of so-called ‘national solidarity’ under Giulio Andreotti, without altering its policies or conceding any ministries to the PCI. Repressive legislation, gratuitously curbing civil liberties, was stepped up. Two years later, the Red Brigades seized the DC’s most influential leader, Aldo Moro, in Rome, demanding the release of its prisoners in exchange for freeing him. During his 55 days of captivity, fearing he would be abandoned by his own party, Moro wrote increasingly bitter letters to his colleagues, posing a clear threat to Andreotti were he to be at large. In this crisis, once again the PCI showed neither humanity nor common sense, denouncing any negotiations to secure Moro’s release more vehemently than the DC leadership itself, which was understandably torn.

Moro was duly left to his fate. Had he been allowed to live, his return would certainly have split Christian Democracy and probably ended Andreotti’s career. The price of saving him was negligible. The Red Brigades, a tiny group that in any objective sense was never a significant threat to Italian democracy, could hardly have been strengthened by the release of a few of its members, who would have been under continuous police surveillance the moment they walked out of jail. The notion that the prestige of the state could not survive such a surrender, or that thousands of new terrorists would have sprung up in its wake, was little more than interested hysteria. The Socialists realised this, and argued for negotiations. *Plus royalistes que le roi*, the Communists, in their anxiety to prove that they were the firmest of all bulwarks of the state, sacrificed a life and saved their nemesis in vain. The DC showed no gratitude. Once he had used them, Andreotti – a greater master of timing than De Gasperi himself – reduced them. When elections came in 1979, the PCI lost a million and half votes, and was out in the cold again. The ‘historic compromise’ had yielded it nothing, other than the disillusionment of its voters and a weakening of its base. When in the following year Berlinguer called on Fiat workers, threatened with mass dismissals, to occupy their plants, his appeal fell on deaf ears. The last big industrial action in which the party would ever engage was rapidly crushed.

Five years ago, reflecting bitterly on his country’s politics, Giovanni Sartori remarked that Gramsci had been right to distinguish between a war of position and a war of manœuvre. Great leaders – Churchill or De Gaulle – understood the need for wars of manœuvre. In Italy, politicians knew only wars of position. He himself had always thought the title of Ortega y Gasset’s famous book *España Invertebrada* would be still more apt for Italy, where the Counter-Reformation had created deep habits of conformism, and continual foreign invasions and conquests had made the Italians

specialists in survival by bending low. Lacking any elites of mettle, this was a nation without a bone in its body. Sartori was not talking at random. His addressees were the political class he described. By this time, the PCI was gone, Berlusconi was in power and his central objectives were clear: to protect himself and his empire from the law. The *ad personam* measures to secure both, pushed through Parliament, landed on the desk of the president. The Italian presidency is not a purely honorific post. The Quirinale not only nominates the premier, who must be ratified by Parliament, but can also withhold approval of ministers, and refuse to sign legislation. In 2003 the incumbent was the former central banker Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, an ornament of the centre-left who had headed the final government of the First Republic, served as finance minister under Prodi, and is today a senator for the Democratic Party.

Imperturbably, Ciampi signed exceptional legislation not only to consolidate Berlusconi's grip on television, but to guarantee him immunity from prosecution – an immunity of which Ciampi himself, as president, was also a beneficiary, as he appended his signature to it. Outside the Quirinale, anguished candle-lit appeals in the street begged him not to. But the heirs of Communism raised no objection. Indeed it had been from the ranks of the centre-left itself that the first draft of the bill for immunity had come. If there was hand-wringing in the press over the law, the president – constitutionally supposed to be *super partes*, and treated with all due reverence – was not put in question. Only one significant national voice was raised, not plaintively, but scathingly, against Ciampi. It came from Sartori, a conservative liberal, who publicly asked Ciampi if he even existed, contemptuously dubbing him a rabbit for his cowardice.

These days, it is a former Communist – Giorgio Napolitano, leader of the most right-wing faction in the PCI after the death of Amendola – who sits in the Quirinale. By the time he was elected, the first immunity law had been struck down by the Constitutional Court. But when it was given a new wrapping – after the fashion of Lisbon, one might say – and the substance of the same bill was voted through again by Berlusconi's majority in Parliament, the head of the post-Communist delegation in the Senate, far from opposing it, explained that the Democratic Party had no objection in principle, though perhaps it should come into force only in the next legislature. Napolitano had no time for such *points d'honneur*, signing it into law on the day he received it. Once again, the only voices to denounce this ignominy were liberal or apolitical, Sartori and a handful of free spirits – immediately reproved in the press not only of Democratic, but Rifondazione obedience, for wanting in respect for the head of state. Such is the *sinistra invertebrata* of Italy today.

Powerful historical forces – the end of the Soviet experience; the contraction, or disintegration, of the traditional working class; the weakening of the welfare state; the expansion of the videosphere; the decline of parties – have borne hard on the left everywhere in Europe, leaving none in particularly good shape. The fall of Italian Communism is in that sense part of a wider story, which lies beyond censure. Yet nowhere else has such an imposing heritage been so completely squandered. The party that was outwitted by De Gasperi and Andreotti, that failed to purge Fascism or split clericalism, was still an expanding force of remarkable vitality, whatever its strategic innocence. Its descendants have colluded with Berlusconi, with no shadow of an excuse, fully aware of who he was and what they were doing. There is now an abundant literature of exposure on Berlusconi, both inside and outside Italy, including at least three first-class studies in English. But it is striking how limp-wristed much of this becomes when it touches on the role of the centre-left in helping him clean his slate and entrench his power. The complicity of its presidents in successive bids to put him – and themselves – above the law is no anomaly, but part of a consistent pattern that has seen the heirs of Italian Communism allowing him to retain and expand his media empire, in defiance of what was once the law; not lifting a finger to deal with his conflicts of interest; springing his right-hand man, and not a few other millionaire criminals, from jail; and repeatedly seeking to cut electoral deals with him, at the expense of any democratic principle, to benefit themselves. At

the end of all this, they have come away not only as empty-handed as their predecessors, but terminally emptier of mind and conscience.

What, for its part, has happened to the great cathedral of left-wing culture in Italy? It had started to crumble long before, its foundations undermined with the one-time citadel of the mass party itself. As in Germany, the shift to the right initially came in the field of history, with a revaluation of the country's dictatorship between the wars. The first volume of Renzo De Felice's biography of Mussolini, covering the years up to the end of the First World War, was published in 1965. But it was not until the fourth, covering the period from the Great Depression to the invasion of Ethiopia, appeared in 1974 – followed a year later by a book-length interview with the American neoconservative Michael Ledeen, subsequently prominent in the Iran-Contra affair – that this huge enterprise had a major impact in the public sphere, attracting a barrage of criticism on the left as a rehabilitation of Fascism. By the time his fifth volume came out, in the early 1980s, De Felice had become an accepted authority, enjoying ready access to the media – he would increasingly appear on television – and meeting decreasing domestic challenge. Soon he was calling for the end of anti-Fascism as an official ideology in Italy. By the mid-1990s he was explaining that the role of the Resistance in what was actually a civil war in the North, in which loyalties to the Republic of Salò had been underestimated, needed to be demystified. His eighth and last volume, incomplete at his death, came out in 1997. In total, De Felice devoted 6500 pages to the life of Mussolini, more than three times the length of Ian Kershaw's biography of Hitler, and proportionately longer even than Martin Gilbert's authorised life of Churchill: the largest single monument to any leader of the 20th century.

The scale of the work, poorly written and often arbitrarily constructed, was never matched by its quality. Its strengths lay in De Felice's indefatigable archival research, and his insistence on a few unexceptionable truths, principally that the militants of Fascism as a movement had come in the main from the lower middle class, that Fascism as a system attracted support from businessmen, bureaucrats, and the higher social classes generally, and that at its height the regime commanded a wide popular consensus. These findings, none of them particularly original, sat in incoherent company with claims that Fascism was an offspring of the Enlightenment, that it had nothing to do with Nazism, that its collapse saw the death of the Italian nation, and not least, with a hopelessly indulgent, oversized portrait of Mussolini himself as a great – if flawed – realistic statesman. Intellectually speaking, De Felice had little of the conceptual equipment or breadth of interest of Ernst Nolte, whose first book had preceded his. But his impact was much greater, not only by reason of the sheer weight of his scholarship, or even of the fact – fundamental though this obviously was – that in Germany Fascism had been discredited much more absolutely than in Italy, but also because by the end of his career there was so little life left in the official postwar culture he had set out to oppose. Significantly, the most radical demolitions of his edifice came from Denis Mack Smith in England, rather than any Italian historian.

But if there was no real counterpart to the *Historikerstreit* in Italy, where De Felice could feel he had achieved most of his goals, there was also a less clear-cut shift of intellectual energies at large to the right than in Germany. De Felice's principal successor, Emilio Gentile, has devoted himself to amplifying the familiar theme that the mass politics of the 20th century were secularised versions of supernatural faith, dividing these into malign brands – Communism, Nazism, nationalism – comprising fanatical 'political' religions, and more acceptable forms, notably American patriotism, that constitute 'civil' religions: totalitarianism versus democracy in sacred dress. This is a construction that has won more of a following in the US or UK than in Italy itself. The same, paradoxically, might be said of the last fruits of operaismo on the left. There, the sober spirit of the *enquête ouvrière* had passed away with the premature death of Panzieri in the mid-1960s, and at the impulsion of Tronti and the young – then equally incendiary – literary critic Alberto Asor Rosa, its

outlook underwent two drastic twists.

From Tronti came the conviction that the working class, far from having to endure successive economic transformations at the hands of capital, was their demiurge, imposing on employers and the state the structural changes of each phase of accumulation. The secret of development lay not in the impersonal economic requirements of profitability from above, but in the driving pressure of class struggles from below. From Asor Rosa came the argument that 'committed literature' was a populist delusion, for the working class could never hope to benefit from the arts or letters of a modern world in which culture as such was, by definition, irremediably bourgeois. No crude philistinism, or simple-minded Tolstoyanism, followed. Rather, it was only the High Modernism of Mann or Proust, Kafka or Svevo, and the radical avant-garde, up to but not beyond Brecht, that mattered as literature – but as so many testimonies, of incomparable formal invention, to the inner contradictions of bourgeois existence, not as a legacy of any use to the world of labour. The gulf between the two could not be bridged by even the best revolutionary intentions of a Mayakovsky: it was constitutive.

"To make good literature, socialism has not been essential. To make the revolution, writers will not be essential. The class struggle takes a different path. It has other voices to express itself, make itself understood. And poetry cannot be behind it. For poetry, when it is great, speaks a language in which things – the hard things of struggle and daily existence – have already assumed the exclusive value of a symbol, of a gigantic metaphor of the world: and the price, often tragic, of its greatness is that what it says escapes from practice, never to return to it."

When this was written, its target was the official line of the PCI, and behind it Gramsci, who had believed that the Communist movement was the legitimate heir of the highest European culture, from the Renaissance, Reformation and Enlightenment onwards, and that among the problems it needed to solve in Italy was the absence of a national popular literature. But as the upheavals of the late 1960s unfolded, first Tronti and then Asor Rosa decided it made more sense to work within the PCI, where the organised working class was after all to be found, than outside it. In taking this step, Tronti transposed his vision of the primacy of struggles in the factory to the activities of the party in society, radicalising it into a theory of the autonomy of politics from production. Younger than Asor Rosa or Tronti, and the most intellectually ambitious of the trio, Massimo Cacciari then completed what they had started, not merely separating culture and economy from revolutionary politics, but proposing a systematic dissociation of all the spheres of modern life and thought from each other as so many technical domains, each untranslatable into any other. In common was only their crisis, equally visible in turn-of-the-century physics, neoclassical economics, canonical epistemology, liberal politics, not to speak of the division of labour, the operations of the market and the organisation of the state. 'Negative thought' alone had been capable of grasping the depth of this crisis – Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Heidegger. What Hegel had joined, they refused: dialectical synthesis of any kind.

Operaismo had always been anti-historicist, it was also anti-humanist. In Cacciari's *Krisis* (1976), it now found inspiration in a line of nihilist thinkers, of whom Nietzsche was initially the most important for his account of the will to power, whose contemporary incarnation could only be the PCI. But there was to be no irrationalism. What the 'culture of crisis' called for was new orders and forms of rationality, specific to each practice. So in guiding the party towards its objectives, Weber and Schmitt – not Gramsci – were the indicated counsellors, each a specialist of politics as cold, lucid technique. Intellectually speaking, a more thorough-going rejection of the Marxism enshrined in the PCI, steeped in a Hegelian spirit of synthesis, would be difficult to imagine. But politically, the Nietzschean turn of *operaismo* proved perfectly compatible with the official line of the party in the early 1970s. For what could the will to power in Italy at the time mean? The answer, Tronti argued, was clear: it was the PCI's vocation to rule the country as the architect of an alliance between

organised labour and big capital to modernise economy and society, not unlike the New Deal in America, which he had always admired – a pact of wages and profits against the parasitism of rents.

The PCI, which had always been tolerant of theoretical differences so long as they did not threaten political disturbance, accommodated the advocates of negative thought without difficulty – by this time it was no longer capable of engaging critically with such exotic outcrops anyway. Sensible of the prestige these were coming to enjoy, in due course it assured them honours in the political sphere whose autonomy they had upheld. Cacciari became a deputy for the PCI, before going on to make a career as mayor of Venice, where he now sits; Tronti and Asor Rosa were eventually made senators. Inevitably, the price of such integration into a party that so conspicuously failed on the terrain of power they had appointed for it, was the fade-out of *operaismo* as a coherent paradigm. Twenty years later, the PCI now only a memory, Asor Rosa would compose a melancholy balance sheet of the Italian left, to which he and Tronti have remained in their own fashion faithful, while Cacciari today is an ornament of the right of the Democratic Party, combining – not unfittingly for an admirer of Wittgenstein – mysticism and technicism in a politics otherwise much like that of New Labour. The intellectual legacy of negative thought was little more than an arid cult of specialisation, and concomitant depoliticisation, in those who came after.

At the crossroads of the late 1960s, Negri went in the opposite direction, advocating not a compact for modernity between capital and organised labour under the aegis of the PCI, but an escalation of conflict between unorganised – or unemployed – labour and the state, towards armed struggle and civil war. After the crushing of the *Autonomia* of which he had been the theorist, and his arrest by a Communist magistrate on trumped-up charges of masterminding the death of Moro, exile in France produced a steady stream of publications, the most notable on Spinoza. Here was prepared the metamorphosis of the non-factory worker of the late 20th-century *Autonomia Operaia* into the 17th-century figure of the ‘multitude’ in *Empire*, written with Michael Hardt, and appearing in the United States well before it saw print in Italy. Since its fame, Negri’s international impact has been larger than his national influence, though a younger following exists. The same holds true of Giorgio Agamben, a latecomer to the constellation, sharing many reference points – Heidegger, Benjamin, Schmitt – with Cacciari, but with a political inflection poles apart.

Viewed comparatively, the similarities of *operaismo* to strands in the gauchisme that flowered in France in the decade from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s are striking – all the more so for the lack of any direct contact between them. It seems to have been an objective concordance that took thinkers around Socialisme ou barbarie along much the same path as those around Contropiano, from a radical workerism to an anti-foundational subjectivism – although in the later Negri or Agamben, with their debts to Deleuze or Foucault, French and Italian currents flowed directly into each other. The contrasting outcome of the two experiences is largely to be explained by differences of national situation. In France, the PCF offered no temptations, and the revolt of May-June 1968 was as brief as it was spectacular. In Italy, where the popular rebellion lasted much longer, Communism was less closed, and the thinkers were significantly younger, the after-life of *operaismo* remains greater, if confined to the margins.

Retrieval of Fascism on the right, eclipse of workerism on the left, have relocated the space of the centre, in which secular and clerical versions of the *juste milieu* have traditionally coexisted. There, paradoxically, the break-up of Christian Democracy, ending the rule of an overtly Catholic political party, rather than diminishing the role of religion in public life, has redistributed it more widely than ever before across the political spectrum. For DC voters have not only often divided evenly between centre-right and centre-left, but have also proved the most volatile single sector of the electorate, making them a ‘swing factor’ all the more eagerly prized by the contending blocs. In pursuit of them, former leaders of the PCI, not to speak of ex-Radicals, have fallen over each other to explain their private religious sensibility, attendance at mass from an early age, hidden spiritual vocation, and

other requisites for a post-secular politics. In effect, what the Church has lost with the passing of a mass party of strict obedience, it has gained with the diffusion of a more pervasive, if lower temperature influence in society as a whole. With this has gone a descent into levels of superstition not seen in many years: the fruit of Wojtyla's occupancy of the papal throne, when more beatifications were pronounced (798) and saints made (280) than in the previous five centuries put together, the number of miracles necessary for sanctification was halved, and the grotesque cult of Padre Pio – a Capuchin divinely visited by stigmata in 1918, author of any number of supernatural feats – took off, to a point where the mainstream press can in all seriousness debate the veracity of his triumphs over mere laws of science.

A secular culture capable of this degree of complaisance to belief is unlikely to be more combative towards power. Under the Second Republic, opinion in the central organs of Italian print culture has rarely deviated from the neoliberal doxa of the period. Most of its output in this period was indistinguishable from what could be found in the neo-tabloid papers of Spain, France, Germany, England or elsewhere. No self-respecting commentator failed to call for reforms to cure society's ills, for which the remedy was always the need for more competition in services and education, more freedom for the market in production and consumption, and a more disciplined and streamlined state, variations turning only on the sweeteners to be offered to those on the receiving end of the necessary adjustments. Conformity of this kind has been so universal that it would have been unreasonable to have expected Italian columnists and journalists to show more independence of mind. The attitude of the press towards the law is another matter. At the forefront – after the magistrates had launched their attack on its corruption – of the hue and cry against the political class of the First Republic, the press has proved remarkably submissive since Berlusconi established himself as a centrepiece of the new order, limiting itself for the most part to pro forma criticisms, without a hint of the *guerre à l'outrance* that could really have damaged him or driven him from the scene.

For that, its fire would have had to be directed not just against Berlusconi himself, but also against the judges who regularly acquitted him, the statute of limitations that voided charges against him, the presidencies that assured him immunity, and the centre-left parties that made him into an accepted, indeed valued interlocutor. Nothing could have been further from the general tenor of the press in these years, where complaints of malpractice are regularly tinged with fear and servility. The feebleness of this record is highlighted by the rare exceptions to it. Of these, one above all stands out, the reporter Marco Travaglio, whose implacable indictments not just of the criminalities of Berlusconi or Previti, but of the entire system of connivances that has protected them, not least those of the press itself, have few parallels in the tame world of European journalism in these years. Not unexpectedly, Travaglio, whose books have sold in the hundreds of thousands, is a figure of the liberal right, expressing himself with a ferocity and freedom of tone all but unknown on the left. [2]

In Europe – this is not true, at least in the same way, of America – the world of the media as a rule reflects more than it creates the condition of a culture, whose quality ultimately depends much more on the state of its universities. In Italy, notoriously, these have remained archaic and underfunded, many departments sumps of bureaucratic intrigue and baronial patronage. The result has been a steady loss of the country's best minds to positions abroad. Virtually every discipline has been affected, as the roster of leading scholars either based or working for long stretches in the United States shows: Luca Cavalli-Sforza in genetics, Giovanni Sartori in political science, Franco Modigliani in economics, Carlo Ginzburg in history, Giovanni Arrighi in sociology, Franco Moretti in literature, to whom younger names might be added. Not a diaspora in a strong sense, since nearly all have maintained their links to Italy, most still participating in one way or another in its intellectual life, their absence has nevertheless obviously weakened the culture that produced them.

Whether any comparable levies are likely to arise out of the circumstances of recent years remains

to be seen. On the face of it, the chances would seem slim. But it would be a mistake to underestimate the depth of the reserves on which the country can draw. A glance at Spain, whose modernisation is now often held up by self-critical Italians as a model of what they have missed, is a reminder of them. Although its economic growth has been higher, transport systems faster, political institutions more functional, organised crime less widespread, and regional development more even – all real gains over Italy – Spain remains by comparison a provincial culture, with a much thinner and more derivative intellectual life, whose relative backwardness is underlined by the modernities surrounding it. For all the disrepair of the country, the Italian contribution to contemporary letters is of a different order. No country in Europe, indeed, has recently produced a monument of global scholarship to equal the five volumes on the international history and morphology of the novel edited by Moretti, and published by Einaudi – an enterprise of peculiarly Italian magnificence, of whose scale the Anglophone reader gets only a glimpse in the hand-me-down version, parsimonious in sympathy and spirit, issued by Princeton. Nor is it difficult to find examples of a continuing Italian capacity to shake received paradigms abroad. Ginzburg's 'Clues', not to speak of his essay reconstructing Dumézil, attempted by no French historian, would be one case; the distinguished classicist Luciano Canfora's recent book on democracy, censored by its outraged publisher in Germany, would be another; the political scientist Danilo Zolo's demolition of 'international justice' a third. Such traditions do not die easily.

What, beyond the existing cross-party establishment, of political opposition? From the mid-1960s onwards, Italian Communism had another strand, neither official nor *operaista*, that remained more authentically Gramscian than anything its leadership could offer, or ultimately tolerate. Expelled in 1969, the *Manifesto* group around Lucio Magri, Rossana Rossanda and Luciana Castellina went on to create the newspaper of that name that continues to this day, the one genuinely radical daily in Europe. Over the years, it was this current that produced by far the most coherent and incisive strategic analysis of the problems facing the left, and the country as a whole – descent from Hegel, not surprisingly, supplying better equipment for the task than fascination with Heidegger. Today its legacy is in the balance, its three leading figures composing memorials of their experience, each of which will be significant. The first to appear, Rossanda's crisply elegant *Ragazza del secolo scorso*, has been a national bestseller. But in 2005 their journal was closed, and the daily is now, amid the credit crunch, at risk of disappearing. *MicroMega*, the thick bimonthly edited by the philosopher Paolo Flores d'Arcais, is in no such danger, as part of the publishing empire whose showpieces are the Roman daily *La repubblica* and the weekly news magazine *L'espresso*. Under the Second Republic, Flores has made his journal the organiser of the most uncompromising and effective front of hostility to Berlusconi in Italy, playing a political role unique in the EU for an intellectual publication of this kind. A year after the victory of the centre-right in 2001, it was from here that a wave of impressive mass protests against Berlusconi was launched, outside and against the passivity of the centre-left.

In these, two other figures played a central part. One was Nanni Moretti, the country's most popular actor/film director, whose cinema had for over a decade tracked in critical, if often winsome fashion the dissolution of the PCI and its fall-out. The other was the historian Paul Ginsborg, author of the two most commanding histories of postwar Italy, an Englishman teaching at Florence distinguished not only as a scholar but now as a citizen in his adoptive country. In the second of his histories, covering the period from 1980 to 1996, published in English as *Italy and Its Discontents* (and in this edition reaching as late as 2001), Ginsborg put forward the hypothesis that, for all the egoism and greed of its yuppy stratum – the *ceti rampanti* that flourished under Craxi – there existed alongside it in the Italian middle class a sector of more thoughtful, civic-minded professionals and public employees (*ceti medi riflessivi*) who were capable of altruistic actions, and formed a potential source of renewal for Italian democracy. The proposal met with some scepticism when he developed it. But in 2002 it came true. For it was the layer he had identified that essentially provided the troops for

the demonstrations against Berlusconi of that year.

Therein, however, also lay their limitation. The distinctive form they took – demonstrators holding hands round public buildings – was quickly dubbed *girotondi* in the press, or ‘ring-a-ring-o’-roses’. Intended to symbolise the peaceful, defensive spirit of the movement, the result was to give it too easily the air of a children’s game. The centre-left parties, not only disliking the reproach to themselves, but fearing political competition, did little to conceal their hostility. The *girotondini* did not respond in kind. Resolved to avoid any tempestuous actions of the kind that had met the G7 in Genoa, and vainly hoping for an alliance with trade-union leaders in hock to the centre-left, the movement was inhibited from mounting any tougher offensive against the government, let alone its accomplices in the opposition, and eventually undone by its *bon enfant* self-image, could not sustain itself.

When, to the fury of Veltroni, *MicroMega* courageously called for another mass demonstration against Berlusconi’s return to power in the Piazza Navona last summer, the underlying contradictions of the *girotondini* burst into the open, Moretti and half the platform dissociating themselves from the more radical speakers, who this time did not spare Napolitano, the PD or the Rifondazione Comunista. Just as the impenetrable circumlocutions of the latter-day First Republic produced in reaction the calculated crudities of the Northern League, so on this occasion the prissiness of much of the rhetoric of the *girotondi*, more given to pleading than savaging, detonated its opposite, a flamboyant coarseness of image and idiom – Berlusconi’s bedroom boasts virtually inviting this – from comedians famous for detesting the political class, to the acute embarrassment of the better-behaved in the square but apparently not, judging by the opinion polls, to most of the centre-left electorate itself. Politically speaking, the episode could be read as a micro-version of the polarisation of the 1970s, anxious propitiations from above once again provoking angry explosions from below.

In the autumn, such tensions dissolved in the torrent of student protests against the cuts in educational funding, and compression of schooling, voted through by the centre-right, and – a more limited – union mobilisation against the government’s economic response to global recession. The concessions gained are of less significance than the scale of the movements themselves. But a pattern of tactical retreats by Berlusconi and temporary surges of popular anger against him is not new. How this might alter as economic conditions worsen remains to be seen. Putting behind it the dangerous tools of the carpenter and the farmer, the Italian left has adopted one symbol after another from the vegetable kingdom, or thin air – the rose, the oak, the olive, the daisy, the rainbow. Without some glint of metallurgy, it seems unlikely to make much headway.

P.S.

* From the London Review of Books – LRB 12 March 2009:

<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v31/n05/ande01...>

Footnotes

[1] The Italian term is without the anti-intellectual connotation of workerism in English, or *ouvriérisme* in French

[2] *L’odore dei soldi*, by Marco Travaglio and Elio Veltri (Editori Riuniti, 2001); *La scomparsa dei fatti* (Il Saggiatore, 2006); *Mani sporche*, by Marco Travaglio, Gianni Barbacetto and Peter Gomez (Chiarelettere, 914 pp., €19.60, 2007, 978 88 6190 002 8); *Il bavaglio*, by Marco Travaglio, Peter

Gomez and Marco Lillo (Chiarelettere, 240 pp., €12, 2008, 978 88 6190 062 2).