

A New Period for the Italian Left – The end of the Rifondazione era

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Not least of the effects of the recent crisis of the Prodi government is that upon the reorganisation of the Italian left which is underway. It is important for us to emphasise that the crisis has had the effect of speeding up the main projects of the Italian left, which will change their appearance within the course of some years if not within months. Of particular note within this changing political panorama are the likely merger of the DS (Left Democrats) with the Margherita, a part of the former Christian Democrats. At the same time we are likely to see the emergence of a new 'Left party', in which Rifondazione Comunista will participate on the basis of defining a 'social compromise'. Against these projects a new alternative left needs to be built.

The Partito Democratico (Democratic Party)

We should particularly note the forthcoming birth of the Partito Democratico which is likely to find obstacles in its path due to its internal contradictions but which has considerable traction both through the "liberal" vision which it puts forward and through the pressure for "unity" from which it derives its strength.

Unity against the right and against the danger of the "return of Berlusconi", desired in the abstract by a large part of the centre-left electorate, is in fact an essential ingredient which could bring about the successful final transformation of the Italian left that comes from the PCI (Italian Communist Party) tradition. In fact with the Partito Democratico project, which will be approved at the DS (Left Democrats) [1] and Margherita (Daisy) [2] conferences on 20-23 April, the Partito dei Democratici di Sinistra (Party of Left Democrats [3]) will complete the process of adaptation to the laws of capitalism that has long been underway and that was symbolically blessed by the dissolution of the PCI decided upon by Occhetto in 1989.

Today we are finally seeing the launch of the democratic-liberal force with some progressive vestiges that has been talked about for more than a decade - a calculatedly social-liberal force, which although voted for by the majority of the working class does not have the working class at its centre, and whose main aim is to protect the interests of a certain section of the Italian bourgeoisie, that represented by pro-European banks and large companies.

The new Partito della Sinistra (Left Party)

The other project, less visible but also underway for some time, is the one that will probably be called "Partito della Sinistra" in its socialist or neo-social democratic version. The project is still little known, and is only now starting to be much talked about, but it is already being put in train by the leading groups on the left and will, besides profiting from the space left empty by the dissolution of DS, help to resolve the three different and interwoven crises that exist between themselves.

The first crisis results from the defeat of the left-DS inside the congress, when the secretary, Fassino, won with 75% of the votes, and the left only got 15%; a defeat which obliges those who have come out against the project of the Partito Democratico to find an adequate response.

The second crisis is that of Rifondazione (Party of Communist Refoundation), which has found in this project an answer to the impasse in which it finds itself over the governmental crisis, and one which has demonstrated the failure of the strategy outlined by the Venice congress, as can be seen clearly from an interview with Bertinotti published in Liberation, and now admitted more clearly by the party's ruling group.

After Vicenza, after the vote on Afghanistan, after nearly a year of the Prodi government, in fact, the three theses of this congress have shown their weakness: first the idea that country's balance of forces could allow a "Grand Reform" government has been demolished by the result of the election on 9 April which saw a country divided precisely in two, along with an evident marginalisation of the left forces (representing a mere 26-27% of the electorate); second the idea that the centre left had changed in comparison with the 1996 Prodi government composed of exactly the same people and political forces with the exception of Rifondazione, has been briskly given the lie to by the government's action along classic liberal lines of offering finance to the enterprises, cuts in social spending, and increases in military spending - and with the same result in the form of the Partito Democratico of which we spoke earlier; and third the idea of the "permeability" of the Prodi government to social conflict finally crumbled on the night of 17 February with Prodi's reply of "the base is doing what is always does" to the enormous demonstration at Vicenza against the construction of the new US base.

The failure of the government

Then to entangle the two crises we have just described came the crisis of the government, detonated by various different factors (the base at Vicenza, the behaviour of old Christian Democrats such as Andreotti and Cossiga), but substantially provoked by the disillusionment and disenchantment of the part of the electorate that votes centre-left.

The Prodi government has quickly swept away many of the expectations that its victory had generated. Already with the booing from Fiat workers (at the leaders of the CGIL, CISI and UIL after they signed an agreement with the government on pension reform, and after their support for the Finance Bill), we had already seen a certain level of disillusionment, but with Prodi and D'Alema's crass response to Vicenza, the detachment was more clearly evident.

But no part of the future Partito della Sinistra has been willing to make a balance sheet of this reality, instead choosing unconditional support for the government and for the deployment in Afghanistan, and at the same time rediscovering the value of "realpolitik" and of the political class with regard to the hopes and expectations of Porto Alegre and Genova.

Those who avoided subscribing to this scheme and its political logic (as in the case of Franco Turigliatto) were locked into the political corner where it is only possible to “bear witness” and “be pure and consistent” without any ability to be effective, thus demonstrating the state of degeneration in which the left finds itself today.

Another left

But we think that the alternative left can only respond to the crisis if it sticks to its basic values and does not renounce its anti-capitalist radicalism. Anyone who says that compromise and acting as an intermediary are indispensable political tools is helping the return of the right and of Berlusconi (a real and genuine obsession of the “official” left in Italy) while in reality favouring the policies of war and cuts in social welfare, and is only giving real assistance to the bringing about a new victory of the right.

So much so that the most recent polls, a bare year after the 2006 victory, say that today the Italian right would win with more than 55% of the votes. But we are opposed, as we have said publicly, to reassembling for the nth time political forces that are just the same as before, and completely unchanged. Above all we are not willing to travel again the road of “social compromise” to which the future Partito della Sinistra has pledged itself and which closes the period, anomalous for Italian politics, of Rifondazione Comunista, doing so both on the level of policy and of the centre of gravity which it intends to establish for the left: in a prospect of participation in government, premised on a willingness to act as an intermediary force, and incapable of thinking outside a left-liberal framework.

If the Partito Democratico is aiming to put together a bloc of the democratic bourgeoisie and of needy progressives in order to control the popular vote, then the Partita della Sinistra (whose name alludes to the German Die Linken, upon which Bertinotti and Mussi, the left DS leader, and Diliberto and Boselli, leader of the small socialist party SDI, are modelling their project) resembles a new social democracy in which “reformist” and “maximalist” socialists will co-exist as happened at the beginning of the 20th century.

We say no to this prospect and will devote ourselves to the rebuilding of an Alternative Left: alternative to the right, but also to the governmental centre-left, which is moderate and pledged to social compromise.

The alternative left is above all an alternative to what exists at the moment, therefore to the war and to neo-liberalism. This means voting against the war. And against the pensions “counter-reforms” or against the large scale projects that will wreck the environment; and likewise it means not sinking to the level of making compromises with the blackmailing tactics used by the Vatican gerontocracy. The alternative left will operate without “ifs and buts”. This is how we have tried to act as representatives in Parliament during the last few months, by trying to stimulate a huge debate, and being subjected to disciplinary measures like the expulsion of Franco from Rifondazione, and doing our best to stimulate a clarifying discussion within Rifondazione.

The Alternative Left will only be an alternative left insofar as it starts from the class struggle and the social movements and on this basis plans to restart a project of social recomposition and even of political recomposition.

In the immediate future, to talk about an alternative left means to build the “social opposition” to the Prodi government. The decision to remain “technically loyal” to the government as implemented in the Senate (while in the Second Chamber we did not vote) does not diminish but in fact reinforces

this position. The Italian left lives in a state of paranoia about the return of the right and another victory by Berlusconi, but a consistent left cannot turn into the lightning conductor for this situation, and is entitled to choose when to oppose the government without having to make concessions. This is the guideline which led to the announcement of “external support” for the government, while making clear that the government will be judged on the basis of every single one of its measures and plans, starting with the vote against more money for the war in Afghanistan.

So today a new phase is opening which we will try to approach constructively, starting with the consolidation of the Associazione Sinistra Critica (Critical Left Association) as an instrument for launching a process of recomposition and rebuilding an alternative anti-capitalist left and one to the left of the present organisations.

The end of the Rifondazione period

Obviously this all means that a huge problem opens up inside Rifondazione, which is hastening to change its policies for the future.

Our judgement is that the period represented by Rifondazione is over, that this party has run its course. The decision to subordinate itself to the choices made by the government, to vote for war, to return to the old method of purges and expulsions (not to say of political and moral lynchings), to embark on the construction of a new political subject of which the foundation of a European Left is only the first stage, have the characteristics of the end of a period. A new phase is opening. Certainly, Rifondazione has not been the revolutionary subject that we intended to build, but rather a process of social and political resistance which was able to open the way to a new period. This was achieved partly, but only partly.

Rifondazione has carried out one worthy historical task, that of maintaining a communist perspective in a phase of depression and abandonment of their former positions by the old vanguards of the working class. But it was unable to turn the tide, not even with the extremely important efforts of the anti-globalisation movement. It was unable to address the problem of social radicalisation and how to achieve victories, albeit partial ones, in such a way as to point the way to a countervailing tendency or a reversal in the balance of social forces. This limitation was very visible in its absence of influence in the trade unions.

Rifondazione has not emerged strengthened from this period of resistance, if you look at the level of militancy, the ability to mobilise, the state of branches, paper sales, etc., and it does not seem to be able, without overcoming its own limitations, to be able to put forward proposals for a new period. In the eyes of most people in the party, it is precisely this overcoming its own limitations which constitutes the main project for the future, with the proposal of the Sinistra Europea (European Left), the first step for the new Partito della Sinistra, which has been put forward as the continuation of the spirit of refoundation.

But this new step has ceased to be anti-capitalist in any consistent manner, or to be an alternative to the liberal left. The logic of being in government, the real obstacle at this stage to building a working class left, has led to a consistent course of action that breaks sharply with the history of the PRC (Party of Communist Refoundation).

Sinistra Critica for the Sinistra Alternativa

If Rifondazione has come to the end of its life and has largely failed in its aim of recomposing the working class and anti-capitalist left, we ourselves still believe that different ways need to be found of carrying out this task.

We are talking about an extremely difficult objective, made more difficult by the failure of Rifondazione which we have acknowledged here. We should have no illusions about this: a further defeat of the left will produce more demoralisation and regression, especially if it is registered in the absence of any clear alternative. To be able to maintain a prospect of building an anti-capitalist left however is indispensable if we wish to keep a group of reference points and ways of working that can form an authentic terrain for consistent anti-capitalist work.

We cannot predict the forms that the new period will take. Probably they will not take the traditional roads that the left is used to. We for our part think that the reorganisation should discover its content and its line of march, and then furnish itself with suitable organisational forms. We would definitely not go into a neo-social democratic party and be able to keep alive the option of an anti-capitalist, ecological, feminist and internationalist left, which is the axis along which we propose to work and build. But we intend to do it in a positive way, building movements and social struggles, accumulating experiences and attracting vanguard activists around a shared project.

This is why we have decided to form the new association Sinistra Critica, which at our last meeting became "Sinistra Critica, associazione per la sinistra alternativa" ('Critical Left, association for the alternative left'). Sinistra Critica has been born as an anti-capitalist current during a party battle. Today our political priority is the building of Sinistra Critica as a political subject.

The building of a new instrument for taking political initiatives, or a "political subject" as we say in Italy, does not mean that the space filled by the anti-capitalist left can be reduced to this. The difficulty of the social period, the limits of the movement, the stagnation of the class struggle, the failure by the workers' movement to learn the lessons of various crises, still pose the task of political recomposition as a necessity. The fact that this is more difficult than in the past does not preclude the orientation of our work being that towards strengthening a broad, pluralist, anti-capitalist, democratic, feminist, environmentalist and internationalist left.

This is a subject which is relevant to the whole European left, which has been made a laughing stock by the Sinistra Europea (European Left Party) and its strategy of an organic alliance with social democracy in full knowledge of the fact that the necessary recomposition has to have, more obviously than was the case at the beginning of the 90s, a very clear indication of its working class and anti-capitalist character. Now in fact, shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the USSR, in many matters we acted with the knowledge that it was necessary to "resist" and to recompose the communist vanguard elements that had ties to the working class and wanted to undergo a process of political and programmatic clarification. This period is over. Today the process of recomposition has benefited from several important experiences: the Italian and Brazilian ones, and, upon different terrain, the French and English, where you are talking about four countries especially committed to and influenced by the global justice movement.

It is true that the difficult question of government in a capitalist country is decisive: to underestimate it after all that has happened in Brazil and Italy could be a fatal error. This is the debate that will be faced within the anti-capitalist European left, which Rifondazione emerge from not by accident, and which today has the chance to make a qualitative leap forward, at least on the level of the discussion, but also on the level of taking political and social initiatives. Sinistra Critica will be happy to devote its energy to this course.

However from the failure of the Rifondazione project the centrality of a process of social recomposition has emerged in renewed form as a preliminary lesson for the future, and within this problematic the trade union problem is the one that has been most starkly revealed. We need to have a serious discussion about this, as without at least a partial project for implantation in the working class and for social recomposition, which the movement has in fact hinted at in recent years, the reconstruction of a class left will never take place.

Such a discussion would also be useful as a more accurate reflection of the global justice movement, on this particular crisis which today exists between organised politics, often constituted by professional political layers, and society, since this way there can be a better assessment of the consistency and the quality of the social and political vanguards. A process of reflection, which makes a new phase of “social learning” necessary to undertake radical reconstruction is integral to these processes: the organised workers’ movement is no longer adequate as a “comfort zone” in which people can stay, profiting from radicalisation elsewhere and limiting activities to propaganda. This is the new phase which is opening. It is hard to say whether we can do it, whether we have the necessary forces, but certainly we have no more credible or interesting alternatives.

Franco Turigliatto was elected as a Senator for Piedmont on the PRC list, but subsequently expelled from Rifondazione for voting against the Afgan war in the Senate. He is a leading member of Sinistra Critica, and of the Italian section of the Fourth International.

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P.S.

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Footnotes

[1] Successor organisation of the PCI.

[2] Remnants of the CDI, Christian Democrats.

[3] Earlier name of DS.