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Introduction by Leopoldo Nuti, Università degli Studi Roma Tre

The Italian political elections of March 2018 seem to have marked a profound discontinuity in the country's political history. The clear winners—namely the Five Stars Movement and the League—were two (relatively) new political forces which had very little in common with each other, except their outspoken intention to steer the path of Italian politics in a new, and for many analysts, unpredictable direction. Nor was it particularly clear whether they be actually able to mend the significant differences in their political platforms and form a parliamentary coalition to support a joint government—which they eventually did, after a protracted stalemate and endless negotiations that repeatedly seemed on the verge of failure. Defining their identity and their political goals remains, to this day, a rather elusive goal. Both parties pride themselves in their having escaped traditional politics and in their capacity to respond directly to their electorate outside of more conventional political channels. The Five Star Movement identifies their electorate in "the people of the web" and make ample use of internet to align to any swings in its mood, while the League, which in its previous incarnation openly advocated the secession of the Northern part of the country, has now morphed into a somewhat rightwing/nationalist force under the shrewd leadership of Matteo Salvini. Both parties are usually referred to as "populist," and analysts group them together with the analogous political parties which are spreading across most of the Western world. But is this analysis correct? Are these forces just the Italian version of a broader worldwide trend, or are they uniquely Italian? And how new are the ideas they represent in the history of Italian politics? What does their emergence tell us about the peculiarity (or lack thereof) of Italy as a Western democracy?

We have asked these questions of an international panel of two Italian historians and one American political scientist, all of whom point out the connections between what is going on in Italy and similar trends evolving across much of the Western world. According to Renato Moro, the first goal of any historian trying to understand the evolution of Italian politics should be to get rid of the stereotypes about its colorful peculiarities and focus instead on some of the hard facts of Italian history. Moro stresses in particular the sinister capacity in which Italy, as a full-fledged Western democracy but at the same time a rather fragile one, anticipates larger trends which sooner or later will spread to the other countries of Western Europe. In his account, Italy should be actually regarded as a canary in a coal mine: an early warning system of the possible diseases that will sooner or later affect most advanced countries.

Giovanni Orsina elaborates this point even further and interprets the Italian crisis as part of a broader "crisis of the political" which affects most of the West and which, in the Italian case, spans across at least the last quarter of a century, as it can be dated back to the end of the cold war. In its current version, Orsina believes that the Italian crisis stems from the interaction of three different features—"the desire to punish the established political forces no matter what, the reduction of politics to theatre, and the hope to reinstate the political into its proper place." The latter, in particular, is according to Orsina particularly relevant to understanding the success of these new political forces. Their main source of appeal is in fact the utterly unrealistic and theatrical promise to an increasingly frustrated electorate to restore some form of national control over the political decision-making process.

Frustration, but mostly as a consequence of the results of economic dislocation, is also highlighted by Harvey Feigenbaum as one of the key factors that explain the growth of populist movements across most of the West. From his perspective, what is happening in Italy is basically one of the consequences of the evolution of the world economy, and in particular of the bifurcation of the labor market which affected most developed economies and distorted their traditional structures. Italy was lucky enough, Feigenbaum argues, not to have

its economic problems also exacerbated by the financial crisis which originated in the US and subsequently hit some of the other Western countries. Italy was spared some of its worst consequences as most Italian banks had followed a rather cautious policy towards the speculative bubbles of international finance. Yet the fragmentation and inefficiency of the Italian political system made it harder to elaborate an effective political response to the general problems unleashed by the economic revolution of the last three decades.

All together, we hope that these essays offer a significant contribution in locating the Italian crisis into the broader picture of the current political, cultural and economic turmoil of the West.

Participants:

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Renato Moro is Full Professor of Contemporary History at Roma Tre University. Since 2005 he is co-editor of the quarterly journal *Mondo contemporaneo. Rivista di storia*. Since 2016 he is President of the National Edition of Aldo Moro's Works, Ministero dei Beni e delle Attività culturali, and since 2018 President of

CIVITAS—Forum of Archives and Research on Christian Democracy. His studies concern the relationship between politics and religion in twentieth-century history (fascism, nationalism, political religions, anti-Semitism, anti-Protestantism, pacifism). Among the books of which he is author, editor, and co-editor are: *La formazione della classe dirigente cattolica* (1979); *La Chiesa e lo sterminio degli ebrei* (2002; sp. transl. 2004); *Cattolicesimo e totalitarismo. Chiese e culture religiose tra le due guerre mondiali (Italia, Spagna, Francia)* (2004); *Guerra e pace nell'Italia del Novecento. Politica estera, cultura politica e correnti dell'opinione pubblica* (2006); *Una vita, un paese. Aldo Moro e l'Italia del Novecento* (2014); *Salire a Barbiana. Don Milani dal Sessantotto a oggi* (2017).

Giovanni Orsina is Professor of History and Deputy Director of the School of Government at Luiss-Guido Carli University, Rome. He was a visiting scholar at St Antony's College Oxford, Sciences Po Paris, and the ENS Cachan. He is an editorialist for the Turin newspaper *La Stampa* and the Roman newsmagazine *L'Espresso*. His most recent books are *Berlusconism and Italy. A Historical Interpretation* (Palgrave, 2014) and *La democrazia del narcisismo. Breve storia dell'antipolitica* (Marsilio, 2018).

Essay by Harvey B. Feigenbaum, The George Washington University

The Italian Elections and the New Fascism

The election of 4 March 2018 added Italy to the list of countries rocked by populist movements. The phenomenon is not new, but the Italian variant is unusual in that even the populists are fragmented. The two biggest blocs are The Five Star Movement and the Lega (League). In many ways former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia and its ally, the Brothers of Italy, are also populists, though Berlusconi's party contains the rump of very mainstream Christian Democrats, who dominated Italy during much of the postwar period. However, the Five Star Movement and the Lega, by themselves, are large enough to form a government in the new parliament. These two parties can also meet the claim of being anti-establishment, although the Lega has previously governed as part of Berlusconi's coalition. While the Five Star Movement has positions that are hard to pigeonhole, for reasons I'll discuss below, its partner has more than a whiff of fascism. The movement toward a new kind of fascism is broad, and by some measures, deep. It is not limited to Europe.

Old and New Fascism

Shortly after the election of Donald Trump in November of 2016, I got an e mail from a concerned academic friend in Britain, asking me how things were going considering the shocking results of the election. I told him it was now easier to teach Karl Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire.* This, of course, is the story of how Napoleon III seized power during a period of economic crisis, first by being elected on a base of mostly rural support, then by making himself Emperor. Marx's analysis of France in the 1850s inspired the historian David Abraham to apply it to the collapse of the Weimar Republic in Germany. Now many writers around the world have begun to review the events that led to fascism, finding many similarities between the rise of dictatorships in the interwar period and our contemporary situation. Even the usually shortsighted political establishment has started to worry, evidenced by a new book by Bill Clinton's secretary of state, Madeleine Albright.[1] Though she's a centrist and an old Cold Warrior, Albright's parents had fled Czechoslovakia to escape Hitler during the 1930s.

The current situation does have similarities with the right wing populist movements of the 1930s, but there are also differences. Historically, fascism had an ideological component. The Israeli political theorist Ze'ev Sternhell saw the roots of fascist ideology in the extreme left of the early 20th century as well as in the mysticism of Georges Sorel and the modernist impatience of the Italian Futurist movement. [2] Would-be revolutionaries of 'direct action,' disaffected by the moderation of the Europe's social democratic parties, cast their lot with right wing nationalists. They replaced class struggle with struggles among nations. Theorists like Roberto Michels, having discovered anti-democratic flaws in the German Social Democratic Party, which he called "the Iron Law of Oligarchy," began to view democracy as a scam (he finished his career in Mussolini's fascist Senate). These themes came together in the romance of the crowd and the machine, adding the concept of a popular will that was only subverted by bourgeois elites. Fascists preached the direct connection

[1] Madeleine Albright, *Fascism: A Warning* (New York: Harper Collins, 2018).

[2] Zeev Sternhell, "Fascist Ideology" in Walter Laqueur, ed., *Fascism: A Reader's Guide,* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976), 315-378.

of the Leader to the People. They combined elements of a social safety net and national planning (popularized by Hendrik de Man, the Belgian collaborationist *de facto* prime minister) with subservience to the State, the latter being the incarnation of the People. The demagogues who rose to power on these ideas also preached an aggressive foreign policy and the benefits of war. Consequently, these successful politicians had no use for the League of Nations, the multilateral diplomacy of its day.

Today it is not hard to see parallels between Napoleon III, the rise of fascism, and the current trends broadly labeled 'right wing populism.' Partially, the movement was encouraged by waves of immigrants and refugees arriving in Europe from conditions of war and poverty in the Middle East and Africa. These victims of violence and starvation had an additional burden of not looking like the paler populations north of the Mediterranean. Their biggest problem, however, was that there were so many of them. And they arrived at a time when Europeans were emerging from the worst recession since the 1930s. People who are economically insecure, whose lives are precarious, find it difficult to be generous. While the initial reactions of Europeans were hospitable, political opportunists began to see the advantages of playing on people's prejudices and fears.

Jingoism and xenophobia proved providential to the far right in many countries. Those attributes are what define them. Economic philosophies tend to vary. Of course this was also true historically. Vilfredo Pareto, still an icon among neoclassical economists, supported the fascists, though he later thought better of it. *Alternative für Deutschland* in Germany was founded by two neoliberal economists who were upset by the interventionist tendencies of the European Union. The National Front of France tended to favor neoliberalism under Le Pen *père*, but switched to favoring welfare policies for indigenous citizens under his daughter Marine. There was of course historical precedent in the social services model adopted by Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini. Hitler's party was, of course, the National *Socialist* German *Workers' Party*; Mussolini also began as a socialist.

The New Populists and their Economic Roots

The Five Star Movement, the populist party which became the biggest party in Parliament after the March 2018 elections, sees itself as an anti-corruption party and advocates many economic reforms championed by the left in Italy. These include the reform of pensions and a guaranteed minimum income and a rejection of austerity. The Lega, a far-right party, originally urged northern Italy to secede from the prodigal Republic led by Rome, but it now concentrates on a more narrowly racist and Eurosceptic agenda. There are similarities to other populist movements, but with significant variations. The United Kingdom Independence Party's economic philosophy, such as it is, is mostly economic nationalism, much like the similar thoughts held by Donald Trump. Neo-fascists in Austria claim to be European Union (EU)-friendly, reserving their hostility for immigrants. Prime Minister Viktor Orban in Hungary started as an economic liberal, but found he could sell himself better as a nationalist with a large dose of antisemitism. The Law and Justice Party in Poland shares many similarities to Orban's Fidesz party in Hungary, with both criticizing the EU, while skimming off as much of the EU's handouts as they can possibly get away with.

It seems quite likely that the economic roots of the current populist wave are very much to be found in the evolution of the world economy. Overall, the world has shifted to an open economy. The U.S. made an effort to set up a trading system after the Second World War that lowered tariff and non-tariff barriers, initially facilitating the dominance of American industry as Europe and Asia began to rebuild. They were extremely successful in setting up an open world economy, championing free market economic policies and doing as much as possible to undermine statist approaches in Europe and elsewhere. The CIA did what it could to

finance European conservatives, to set up pro-market trade unions and undermine Western European Communists. European trade unionists facilitated these efforts by fighting among themselves, as did left wing parties. The conditions were thus easily established for a world where capital was more mobile than labor, and gradual outsourcing of manufacturing activities to low-wage economies became the norm. High-wage workers were also increasingly displaced by automation. For countries in the European Union, these forces equally held sway. The European Commission usually gave credence to the advice of neoclassical economists and rarely paid heed to the objections of the Left.

The economic sectors that could not easily be outsourced were services. Developed economies came to be dominated by their service sectors. These were not only the infamous low-wage industries such as fast food or hotels, but also high-end sectors like financial services, scientific research, and not-so-highly paid education. This led to bifurcated labor markets in developed economies. Wages began to take on a bi-modal distribution. The gap between rich and poor became exaggerated, especially in countries where income taxes were less progressive, or where much of the taxation was indirect, via sales and Value-Added (VAT) taxes, or where welfare states were modest, as in the U.S.

The problem with service economies is that they resist gains in productivity. Service industries (this sounds like a contradiction, but "industry" is now used as a synonym for "sector") tend to be labor intensive, difficult to automate, and even difficult to measure.

While Gross Domestic Product rose in most developed countries, wages did not keep pace. People with modest educations were the most vulnerable in such economies. Even when economies appeared robust, the number of people whose lives were precarious rose. Labor market protections that had been put in place during happier times turned out to be problematic for young people just entering the labor force. Companies in countries where it was difficult to dismiss employees tended not to hire new ones, for fear of not being able to lay them off in hard times.

Intensification of Crises

Capitalism is prone to crises and those beginning around 2007 were especially dangerous. The advent of the "sovereign debt crisis" associated with the Euro, and the pressure from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the EU, and Germany to impose austerity on countries in difficulty made things worse. Part of the reason for the sovereign debt crisis was the unsound creation of the Euro. The Europe-wide currency had been created initially for political reasons, mostly to signal greater integration. Euroland countries with different levels of debt and public spending all had the same currency. Normally when trade imbalances, debts, and deficits are high, devaluation of the currency can be a remedy. A country with a devalued currency can reduce imports and sell more exports. This path was not open to Euroland members. In Italy this problem became the underpinning of Five Star's and the Lega's Euroscepticism…and their popularity.

These issues were made worse by the financial crisis emanating from the United States. This began with the subprime loan crisis, where deregulation had allowed American banks to lend money to people unlikely to repay, mostly in the form of home mortgages. American banks repackaged hundreds of such mortgages as Collateralized Debt Obligations, allowing them to disguise the weakness of the loans, and which were sold to European banks. New, extremely risky, financial instruments like Credit Default Swaps, and even more esoteric derivatives, made things worse. Debt revulsion in the US quickly spread to Europe, putting many

banks in jeopardy. Bailouts in economically weakened countries had to be refinanced by the IMF and the EU, where Germany insisted on budget austerity as the price of a bailout.

These events amplified other economic problems. Though its cumulated public debt was high, Italy was actually in much better shape than many others: Spain suffered from the collapse of a real estate bubble, Greece from unsound public finances, France from banks that were over-leveraged in a market where labor rules made companies reluctant to hire. Italy, however, was hampered by a fragmented political system. Shaky coalition governments, high levels of corruption, and significant clientelism made it almost impossible for governments to take decisive action.

The overall impact was the delegitimization of governments across Europe. The terrain made it much easier for demagogues to convert a broad malaise into a crisis of confidence in democratic institutions. Anti-immigrant racism fanned the fires.

Italy and Greece were on the front lines of the new immigration crisis. Refugees fleeing the dangers of the Middle East and Africa landed first at the EU's southern shores. Dealing with them would have been difficult in good times, but during a period of economic stagnation the results were catastrophic.

The American 'Exception' and the Italian Context

The U.S. did not confront the same challenges as the Europeans, but arrived at similar results. The success of Barack Obama and the Democratic majority in 2008 allowed the U.S. to escape the austerity conservatives visited upon Western Europe. Consequently, the American economy rebounded quickly, while Europe suffered.

The neoliberal order was worldwide, but the new fascism would come to the U.S. through politics, rather than economics. This was manifested in the 2016 presidential election where the Democrats ran a weak candidate. Many in her own party disliked Hillary Clinton. In fact, Obama's meteoric rise owed much to the fact that many Democrats were desperate to find an alternative to the "inevitable" Clinton in 2008. In the 2016 cycle when she tried again, the alternative of Bernie Sanders was less successful. Hillary Clinton, the centrist technocrat, became the nominee.

The electoral results surprised many pundits, but in retrospect were predictable. Many young, black, and Latino voters stayed home, while Republicans turned out as usual. Thus, Donald Trump was able to win with a base of rural voters (favored by the Electoral College) and a few disaffected workers (many of these had already migrated to the Republicans in the 1980s as 'Reagan Democrats'). No one was more flabbergasted than Trump himself. He had few prepared policies, a bias toward economic nationalism, and a distinct predilection for racist and authoritarian solutions.

Many in Europe are especially concerned by the new regime in Washington. Right-wing populism has proved a threat almost everywhere, but in the U.S. the effects of a populist regime are especially damaging. Donald Trump has no special animus toward Italy, but his policies have weakened the European Union and NATO. Atavistic nationalism continues to spread. Trump's victory created a context where populists appeared to be prescient and where unrepentant nationalists thrive.

On 1 June 2018, after much wrangling and a false start rejected by Italy's president, a new government was sworn with a compromise prime minister, an obscure law professor named Giuseppe Conte. The real power would lie with the two-party leaders, Luigi di Maio of Five Star, and Matteo Salvini of the Lega, who took labor and interior ministries, respectively. Both are deputy prime ministers. The new economy minister, Giovanni Tria was a last-minute compromise after the deeply Eurosceptic Paolo Savona was rejected by the head of state. While some of the more phantasmagorical elements of their earlier drafts have been toned down, the rejection of elite orthodoxies is clear. Italy seems to be on a course set directly into a storm. But the Italian ship of state is difficult to turn easily and the fabled inertia of the bureaucracy may (temporarily) save the day. However, the discredited elite, the fragmented nature of Italian politics, and the thin margin of the populist victory do not bode well. I am reminded of an article I read in the New York Times when it criticized the Italian state almost forty years ago: "The Fall of Rome Goes On and On."[3]

[3] David Holden, "The Fall of Rome goes on and on," *New York Times,* 9 March 1975, 4; https://www.nytimes.com/1975/03/09/archives/the-fall-of-rome-goes-on-and-on-despite-new-barbarian-forces-the.html.

Essay by Renato Moro, Università degli Studi Roma Tre

Beware of Italy! Italian 2018 Elections in Historical Perspective

Do not underestimate Italy and Italians in politics, ever.

Light and atrocity, spontaneity and passion, art and religion, beauty and crime have always been foreigners' fundamental keys to understanding Italian life. Miss Lucy Honeychurch, the protagonist of E.M. Forster's *A Room with a View* who is looking for "true Italy," has her first encounter with the country in the name of both beauty and violence. After visiting the frescoes in the Florentine Church of Santa Croce and while touring Piazza della Signoria, she witnesses the murder of an Italian man:

> Then something did happen.
>
> Two Italians by the Loggia had been bickering about a debt. "Cinque lire," they had cried, "cinque lire!" They sparred at each other, and one of them was hit lightly upon the chest. He frowned; he bent towards Lucy with a look of interest, as if he had an important message for her. He opened his lips to deliver it, and a stream of red came out between them and trickled down his unshaven chin.
>
> That was all. A crowd rose out of the dusk. It hid this extraordinary man from her, and bore him away to the fountain.[1]

This image is ubiquitous not only in literature. Italian studies have often suggested more or less the same picture: in 2000 a leading British historian, Paul Ginsborg, when editing a great exhibition in Rome on "The 20th Century. Art and History in Italy," selected municipality, family, patronage, and religion as the fundamental elements of modern Italian life.[2] Thus Italian politics too has often been perceived as traditional and unstable, unfathomable and deeply peculiar, different from any other case in the world.

The commonplace idea that Italians have a passionate psychology, that they probably gave the world its most important artistic civilization from Antiquity to Baroque, that Catholicism (with its churches and Madonnas) permeates Italian cultural and geographic landscape, that Italy is a backward society distinguished by an "amoral familism" (as Edward C. Banfield maintained in his 1958 classic),[3] that criminal organizations have had a relevant role in the country since at least 1945, or that Italian politics is a very complicated matter, is undisputable. But when submitted to critical inquiry, this image, as with every commonplace assumption, is

[1] E.M. Foster, *A Room with a View*, (London: Arnold, 1908), available at: https://www.gutenberg.org/files/2641/2641-h/2641-h.htm, accessed 12 July 2018.

[2] Paul Ginsborg, "Storia e arte nell'Italia del ventesimo secolo," in *Novecento. Arte e storia in Italia* (Ginevra-Milano: Skira, 2000), 41-61.

[3] Edward C. Banfield, *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society* (New York: Free Press, 1958).

revealed to be essentially false, and probably only the fruit of the power of suggestion which Italy still exerts on strangers, who are fascinated by the 'different,' picturesque, traditional and primitive aspects of its life.

Just consider this fact. Already in 1914 Italy had the fifth largest GDP in the world, after the U.S., Germany, the UK and France. In 1918 it was one of the four 'great powers' at the Paris Peace Conference. After fascism, war, and defeat, and after reconstruction and the 1960s economic 'miracle,' Italy overcame Great Britain and became the sixth largest world economic power following the United States, the Soviet Union, Japan, Germany, and France. Notwithstanding all of its recent economic difficulties, Italy is still today the seventh. It neither was nor is such an underdeveloped society. From 1861 to the fascist period, the separation between Church and State was an undisputed dogma. And even during the five long post-war decades of dominance of a Catholic party, Italy never became a confessional state. Now it is one of the more secularized societies in the world. As for politics, Liberal Italy was one of the more developed democracies of its time, and it gave birth to a tumultuous mass society. Universal male suffrage was introduced in Italy seven years before it was in Great Britain.

So do not underestimate Italy and Italians in politics.

Their contribution to the political history in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has not been a minor one. On the contrary, if one gives only a general overview of Italy's modern history, it is easy to realize that Italy has been a ground-breaking laboratory for modern politics, and has donated many novelties (even if they certainly are not all positive) to the world.

Anticipating Joseph Stalin and Adolf Hitler, in 1919 Benito Mussolini gave birth to a new political phenomenon: he formed the first 'militia party' that used violence as the main means for political struggle. In a few years the *Duce* built the first regime in the world that proudly proclaimed itself to be totalitarian.

Between 1944 and 1946 Palmiro Togliatti, the PCI Secretary and leader, suggested that the Italian Communist Party (PCI) would follow the perspective of a "progressive democracy": this would permit to overcome the contrast between reformism and revolution, to enunciate a new "socialist personalism" and to propose an "Italian way" to socialism, deeply different from the Russian experiment.[4] How much 'duplicity' was inherent in Togliatti's position is not relevant for us: the fact is that, whether myth or reality, the idea of a 'different' communism became one of the relevant factors of European, and perhaps global political history, up to PCI leader Enrico Berlinguer in the 1970s and 1980s.[5]

In January 1994 the Italian media tycoon Silvio Berlusconi promoted the birth of "Forza Italia" ("Forward Italy"). Berlusconism, too, was a new political phenomenon: a party without organization, without any inner democracy, and without activists, but using the power of television, addressing people with an anti-

[4] See Elena Aga Rossi, and Victor Zaslavsky, *Togliatti e Stalin. Il PCI e la politica estera staliniana negli archivi di Mosca* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1997) and Aldo Agosti, *Palmiro Togliatti* (Torino: UTET, 1996); for the quoted material, see PalimiroTogliatti, "Ceto medio ed Emilia rossa," in Michele Ciliberto and Giuseppe Vacca, eds., *La politica nel pensiero e nell'azione. Scritti e discorsi 1917-1964* (Milano: Bompiani, 2015), 704-705.

[5] See Francesco Barbagallo, *Enrico Berlinguer* (Roma: Carocci, 2006), and Silvio Pons, *Berlinguer e la fine del comunismo* (Torino: Einaudi, 2006).

establishment, anti-official, anti-intellectual approach that mixed common sense, conservatism, and a direct, populist appeal to people. In the following decades Berlusconism, as with Fascism and Eurocommunism before, gained numerous followers throughout the world.

In 2009, and here we come directly to the recent Italian elections, the Five Star Movement, a new political movement was founded by a popular comedian and blogger, Beppe Grillo, and by a web strategist and businessman, Gianroberto Casaleggio. Again, the movement was a novelty in political history. It added to the many features it had in common with other European and not European populist movements (anti-establishment rhetoric, anti-globalism, an anti-immigration inclination, Euro-scepticism) a totally original utopic dream. The new possibilities opened by the web allowed it to overcome the traditional limits and defects of representative democracy. Finally the dream of a real direct e-democracy would come true. According to the movement, people no longer had to delegate their power to parties, which it deemed old and corrupted intermediates between citizens and the state, ready to serve only lobby and financial interests. On the contrary, citizens could now create a collective intelligence made possible by the Internet, which would offer the possibility of daily voting on laws, projects, candidates, etc. Thus the Internet might substitute, at least partially, for parliamentary representation and finally achieve the 'general will' of assembled citizens, the same will that Jean Jacques Rousseau had envisaged three centuries ago. And in fact the movement decided to call "Rousseau" the web application they use as an instrument of direct democracy.

This historical context of the peculiar and "fertile" Italian inventiveness of new forms of democracy (sometimes completely, sometimes partially, not democratic) is the scenario in which the March 2018 Italian elections need to be located.

Of course, the affirmation of populism is not an exclusive Italian feature. Populist movements and leaders are already governing various European and other countries (even some of the more powerful countries in the world). So populism is a very widespread symptom of a global political crisis. In a 1979 interview in which he discussed the Italian Christian-Democrat political leader Aldo Moro and the problems of Italian democracy, one of the greatest American historians, George L. Mosse, pointed out:

> I think [...] that not only have the strengths of liberalism and Parliamentary government in Western Europe yet to be tested, but that the 1970's opened the first postwar decade of scarcity now that expansion has reached its limits. What effect will this have? Will this not in fact make the old political parties obsolete? Will we not need a new political system to deal with a quite unprecedented fact, the fact of scarcity, of the limits of resources? [...] Historians are bad prophets, but I believe that the new age of scarcity, even if it does not take the same form as the Great Depression, or the crises after the First World War, will lead to strains and stresses which may produce forms of government which I cannot prophesy. [...] I do not think because of this crisis we will once again enter a fascist epoch. Perhaps bits and pieces of authoritarianism will be used, but they will be put together in a different way. [...] I must therefore say that the crisis of parliamentary government is with us, it will probably get worse as our present-day crisis of scarcity gets worse.[6]

If, as Mosse predicted, the whole world is facing now a new phase in history, the Italian case seems nonetheless to be one of particularly radical dimension. In the March 2018 elections, the two populist

[6] George L. Mosse, *Intervista su Aldo Moro* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2005), 81-82, 91-92.

movements (Northern League and the Five Star Movement) reached 50.1% of popular votes. Nothing similar has happened in the developed democracies (in the American presidential elections, or in France, and even in Greece, Austria, or Spain): only in Latin America. This Italian uniqueness arises exactly from the historical heritage of the Italian difficult democracy I have tried to depict. And this uniqueness may be explained as follows.

Italian democracy has experienced two completely different and opposite but equally difficult phases during the Cold War age and after its end.

The Italian political system was deeply conditioned by the Cold War and it was crushed by the War's end in 1989-1991. During the Cold War the Italian political system was one of the more uncertain but also one of the more stable political systems in the world. Foreign observers considered it particularly precarious, with feeble and short governments. Yes, cabinets often changed their composition, but the political system was absolutely steady, and in a certain sense even rigid. From December 1945 to May 1994 (that is for 49 years) the same party, Christian Democracy, remained at the centre of power as the main anti-Communist force; and from May 1947 to May 1994, that is for 47 years, governments were based on the same parties' alliance, based on Christian Democracy (only widening it to the socialists in the early 1960s). There were also two anti-system opposition parties: the communists on the left (25-30% of votes), of course, but also the fascists on the right, because—and this element cannot be forgotten—Italy was the only developed country with a pro-fascist movement that reached between 6 and 9% of votes. The only similar case in the world, in a democratic country, was probably Japan.[7] Thus, when the Cold War ended, the Italian political system collapsed.

None of the parties that in 1948 created the new Constitution is still alive today. Today the oldest party inside the Italian parliament is the Northern League, founded in 1989. This is again something absolutely unique in the case of political systems that have not undergone a regime change. While the Cold War political system was rigid and stable, the post-Cold War political system became one of the more precarious in the world. Many attempts to bring Italy nearer to the great western democracies and give it a bipolar (centre-right vs. centre-left) settlement followed; but bipolarity was revealed to be an illusion: parties became more numerous than ever, coalitions were weakened by internal competition, the major parties remained feeble, and electoral and constitutional reforms (both from the right and from the left) failed. So a sort of everlasting transition started and never ended. Surveys tell us that Italian voters are now some of the more volatile in the world. And probably even during the hardest years of Cold War, political adversaries were never as delegitimized as they have been in Italy in the last twenty years.

Perhaps, in a historical perspective, it would be possible to go even further, and to state that, paradoxically, Italy was favoured by Cold War: it was obliged to be governed by such a party as a Christian Democracy that received a conservative, and even reactionary, vote, but used it for progressive and democratic policies; in parallel, the opposition, the Communist Party, often received the votes of a still anarchist, revolutionary, and violent country and transformed them into a consistently more enlightened politics. Remember that post-war Italian terrorism was a wider and more deeply rooted phenomenon than in any other European country: 12.712 attacks between 1969 and 1982, and 657 different terrorist organizations. Therefore, in historical

[7] On the Japanese political system see Bradley M. Richardson, and Scott C. Flanagan, *Politics in Japan* (Boston: Little Brown, 1984).

perspective, it is possible to think that 1989 did not liberate Italy from a cage, but merely allowed for the return of the 'real country': a more conservative and more populist country than the political forces that, for so many years, had guided or oriented it.

Is it therefore so surprising that the new Italian government is probably the most right-wing one since 1945?

Beware of Italy!

Essay by Giovanni Orsina, Luiss Guido Carli University, Rome

The Crisis of the Political, Italian style

Italy is experiencing yet another political earthquake. In 2013 the system was rocked by the meteoric rise of the Five Star Movement (M5S) that entered Parliament for the first time with 25% of the popular vote. Five years later, during the elections of March 2018, the Movement—which many analysts thought (or hoped) would fade away into irrelevance as fast as it had risen –gained a further 7%. At the same time, within the centre-right coalition, Silvio Berlusconi's *Forza Italia* (FI), a member of the European People's Party, was overtaken by the *Lega*, which Matteo Salvini, who was elected as its Secretary General at the end of 2013, has turned from a dying regionalist party into a flourishing nationalist, anti-establishment, and Euro-skeptical one. As I write, in July 2018, the M5S and the League—the latter having consensually 'divorced' the FI—govern together in the Cabinet headed by Giuseppe Conte. How long they will go on, and what they will achieve, is anyone's guess. What we do know today, though, is that the polls credit both parties with 30% of the popular vote each, give or take, and that the opposition forces—the "traditional" centre-right of *Forza Italia* and the "traditional" centre-left of the *Partito democratico*—are in a lamentable condition, possibly beyond repair.

In this article I argue that the M5S and the League are children of a very profound 'crisis of the political,' and at the same time are an attempt to address it. By 'crisis of the political' I mean the process of the transformation of the political domain that has both blurred its boundaries and weakened its autonomy vis-à-vis other domains (economic, technocratic, judicial, ethical), and called into question its legitimacy and internal functioning. This transformation is by no means only Italian, and it did not begin yesterday: its roots can be traced back at least to the late 1960s, and its symptoms are detectable in many advanced democracies. Among its causes, one could point to the ever more protean nature of Western societies; the increasingly narcissistic traits of their inhabitants; the uninterrupted transfer of power from elected to unelected institutions, national as well as supra-national; the inability of political elites to either imagine a meaningful picture of their own countries or devise credible plans for their future. Although it is not happening in Italy alone, however, the crisis of the political is more advanced to the south rather than the north of the Alps. Here I cannot dwell on the long-term reasons of this unhappy primacy, but they will easily come to mind for anyone familiar with Italian history: a young State, a heterogeneous society, and a high level of political polarization. In the following pages I consider relatively more recent causes, which can be traced back to the previous political earthquake of 1992-1993 and to the question of Italy's sovereignty vis-à-vis the international system and European institutions.

In 1992-1993 a wave of judicial investigations swept away the parties that had ruled Italy since the end of World War II. Although many of the causes of that crisis were domestic, Italy's place in Europe and in the world was also a major issue at the time. During the Cold War, Italian politics found a limiting yet structuring factor. With the collapse of the Soviet bloc, both the limitation and the structure dissolved. The foundering of the Italian party system, moreover, began in the very same year in which the Maastricht Treaty was signed, massive speculation on the lira shoved it out of the European Monetary System, and Italian taxpayers underwent very tight fiscal discipline aimed at squeezing the country into the European straightjacket. The events of 1992-1993, in sum, can also be interpreted as a consequence of the feeling of political freedom generated by the end of the Cold War; as the explosion of the political frustrations that could not be expressed between 1947 and 1989 because of the Soviet threat; and as a rebellion against a political class that was believed not to have adequately prepared Italy for Europe.

The crisis of the early 1990s did not concern merely a specific party system and political class. It went together with an upsurge of generalized antipolitical emotions and an attack on the boundaries, legitimacy, and autonomy of the political domain as such. The widespread confidence in the virtues of civil society and the free market—a remarkable feature of the 1980s that lasted well into the following decade—convinced many that the boundaries of the political could be safely rolled back. The signing of the Maastricht Treaty was believed to prefigure an increasing loss of relevance of national politics. The prominent role that the public prosecutors had played in the events of 1992-1993, and the emphasis on the morality of the political class that had accompanied their actions, led to the political being colonized by ethical and judicial discourses.

Starting with 1994, the Italian political system found a new order. With the formation of a centre-right alliance promoted and hegemonized by tycoon Silvio Berlusconi, and a centre-left alliance pivoting on the post-Communist organizational machine and political class, the alternation in power of opposed coalitions became possible for the first time since the Risorgimento. Yet Italian bipolarism—although many saluted it as the deus ex machina that would solve all the country's problems—was, in fact, quite dysfunctional. The two coalitions tended to deny each other's legitimacy. They repeatedly failed to update the 1948 constitution to the new political circumstances. And rather than countering the anti-political emotions that were abundantly circulating in the public space, they turned them into political resources. This allowed them to control and neutralize those emotions by diverting them into political channels. Yet this also confirmed, legitimized, and reinforced the anti-political Zeitgeist.

The 2011 sovereign debt crisis demonstrated that, despite the adoption of the euro, the post-1994 political system had not managed to solve the long-standing problems of compatibility between Italy and Europe, either. So much so that the two pivotal parties of that system—the heir of Berlusconi's FI, *Popolo della libertà*, and the heir of the post-Communist tradition, *Partito democratico* (PD)—were obliged to support Prime Minister Mario Monti's technocratic government, which, as time went by, was ever more seen as an envoy from Brussels. The sovereign debt crisis, moreover, was not solved in Rome—but in Frankfurt. When Monti replaced Berlusconi as President of the Council of Ministers, in November 2011, the spread between the Italian and the German bonds decreased from 500 to 300 points. After a few weeks, though, it bounced up again. It went down structurally only when the President of the European Central Bank Mario Draghi declared that the Bank was ready to do whatever it took to preserve the euro. Italian voters were thus delivered a clear message: not only had Italian politics failed, but what happened in the national public sphere mattered very little—if at all. A couple of years later, the Italian state's inability to stem the flow of illegal immigrants crossing the Mediterranean, whose numbers quadrupled from 2013 to 2014, gave a further boost to this sense of powerlessness. A number of recent natural catastrophes may also have contributed to that sense—politics having been indicted, on those occasions, for its inability to prevent as well as its slowness to react.

The perceived failure of the established political parties and the suspicion that national politics has become irrelevant have helped break up the political banks that since 1994 had contained the flow of anti-political emotions. By 2011, however, all the possible solutions to the withering away of the political that had seemed realistic and desirable in 1994—civil society; the market; a bipolar, competitive political system; Europe—, had ceased to be viable options. As a consequence, the post-2011 Italian public sphere took on three peculiar qualities. First, unchanneled and deprived of constructive political outlets, the anti-political sentiment has taken on a purely negative character: those who rule must be punished for their failures and gotten rid of, at whatever cost, and no matter the alternative. Second, if national politics is essentially devoid of any real power, then its connection to reality becomes irrelevant and its functions merely symbolic. The political arena turns into a theatre that people attend mostly to be entertained: a place for emotions to be discharged,

indignation to be vented, scapegoats to be found. A sense of responsibility, concreteness, and truthfulness becomes as irrelevant to politicians as it is to actors. Third, the promise to give people the possibility of controlling their own community, no matter how credible, has grown into a relevant political resource, because it addresses a very real feeling of meaninglessness and helplessness. For years, both the traditional parties—especially the PD—and the intelligentsia have placed great emphasis on cosmopolitan and European values. But they have too often forgotten to gauge the concrete effects of those values, and to look at the social strata that would bear those effects. Now those strata want to take back control in order to protect themselves from the impact of such ideals.

The interaction of the three features—the desire to punish the established political forces no matter what, the reduction of politics to theatre, and the hope to reinstate the political into its proper place—explains the electoral success of the Five Star Movement and Salvini's League. Both parties have grown at the polls whenever the voters have perceived a loss of control. The M5S is in many ways the child of the technocratic government: at the end of 2011, when Monti formed his Cabinet, the polls credited the Movement with less than 5% of the popular vote; fifteen months later, at the elections, it received 25%. The *Lega* has grown in parallel with the influx of migrants—although other factors that I cannot analyze here have also played a crucial role in its success. The polls credited it with less than 5% at the beginning of 2014 and more than three times as much eighteen months later, after the exponential growth of trans-Mediterranean migrations. Both parties promise to give control back to the voters. Salvini wants to transfer powers from the European Union to the Italian state and to implement an aggressive strategy of defense of the national interests. Ideologically much more ambiguous than the League, the M5S has promised to give ordinary Italians power over their community by implementing a web-based version of Rousseauian direct democracy. The programs of both parties are riddled with inconsistencies and full of proposals that are very difficult, if not impossible, to implement. Yet voters do not seem to mind. Neither do they seem to care about the positive results—although they are far from incredibly positive—that the governments led by the PD achieved between 2013 and 2018. Voters want to get rid of 'old' politicians. They want to be entertained by 'new' politicians. And they prefer to hear unrealistic promises that their problems will be fixed, rather than be told that they must bear with those problems because there are no simple, painless, and fast solutions.

Predicting the future of Italian politics is next to impossible—not least because several determinants of that future will come from across the Alps. Many believe that the new government's promise to give control back to the Italians will not stand the test of reality, and hope that, tamed by experience, voters will either return to the traditional parties, or migrate towards new parties that are willing to accept the European and international frameworks. That hope is not entirely unfounded—but it is very optimistic indeed. Italy has tried to squeeze itself into the European straitjacket for decades and under the guidance of several governments of different political colors. Its partial failure to do so is no invention of the M5S and the League, and whoever proposes that recipe once again will hardly arouse the enthusiasm of the Italians. The frustration about the crisis of the political is so widespread and deep that it will not let itself be dispelled so easily. The reduction of politics to theatre, and the subsequent degeneration of the public debate, are very advanced—and, once again, the responsibility for this does not lie solely with Salvini and the Five Star Movement. Finally, these days the European construction and the international situation are anything but stable and solid. If the present government fails to restore control to the Italians, a rather likely occurrence, the voters' suspicion that democratic politics does not matter will be confirmed and enhanced. This will hardly make them more moderate and responsible, or ready to throw themselves in the arms of mainstream parties, either old or new. On the contrary, this might enrage them even more. Alternatively, if the international and European circumstances do not allow for the expression of more anger, this might convince

them that their only option is to quietly slip out of the democratic machinery altogether, and stop bothering to vote at all.

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