Moral question and collective emotions in the crisis of the Republic in Italy (1989-1992). For a study of left-wing populism *ante litteram.*

Cuestión moral y emociones colectivas en la crisis de la República en Italia (1989-1992). Para un estudio del populismo de izquierda *ante litteram*.

Tesei, Roberto*
University of Catania, Italy
roberto.tesei@phd.unict.it

Abstract

The crisis of the Italian political system, which was particularly acute between 1989 and 1994, originated both in the context of major international changes and in the system itself, which was incapable of resolving the country's main economic, social and moral issues. Especially during the 1980s, the growing corruption of the political system led to an increased demand for morality and honesty in public action at the end of the decade. While some parties attempted to interpret these sentiments, others were overwhelmed by judicial investigations. The paper examines the cases of the Pds (born from the dissolution of the Italian Communist Party) and Leoluca Orlando's Rete. Both tried to ride the strong emotionalism of the moment, anticipating certain themes and modalities of the following political season, where the arrival of Berlusconi disrupted the old right/left vertical political divisions. They built the grounds through which certain left-wing populist movements - still little studied today - could find fertile ground from the turn of the century to the present day.
Keywords: Populism; Morality; Collective Emotions; Crisis; Left-Wing.

Resumen

La crisis del sistema político italiano, particularmente aguda entre 1989 y 1994, se originó tanto en el contexto de grandes cambios internacionales como en el propio sistema, incapaz de resolver los principales problemas económicos, sociales y morales del país. Especialmente durante la década de 1980, la creciente corrupción del sistema político condujo a una mayor exigencia de moralidad y honestidad en la acción pública a fines de la década. Si bien algunas partes intentaron interpretar estos sentimientos, otras se vieron abrumadas por las investigaciones judiciales. El artículo examina los casos del Pds (nacido a partir de la disolución del Partido Comunista Italiano) y la Rete de Leoluca Orlando. Ambos intentaron movilizar una fuerte emocionalidad del momento, anticipando ciertos temas y modalidades de la siguiente temporada política, donde la llegada de Berlusconi trastocó las viejas divisiones políticas verticales derecha/izquierda. Construyeron los terrenos a través de los cuales ciertos movimientos populistas de izquierda -aún hoy poco estudiados- podrían encontrar un terreno fértil desde el cambio de siglo hasta nuestros días.
Palabras clave: Populismo; Moralidad; Emociones Colectivas; Crisis; Ala Izquierda.

Moral question and collective emotions in the crisis of the Republic in Italy (1989-1992). For a study of left-wing populism *ante litteram*.

The context: the «long decade» of the 1980s

During the 1980s, both in Italy and at a European and international level, many profound transformations took place, with different influences and outcomes. A decade on which historiography has questioned itself for a long time, consolidating valid interpretations (Colarizi, Craveri, Pons and Quagliariello, 2004; Colarizi, Giovagnoli and Pombeni, 2014; Pons, Roccucci and Romero, 2014; Asquer, Bernardi and Fumian, 2014; on the aspects of narrative and symbolic dimension, Mattera and Uva, 2012) , but of which there is still ample space to examine and deepen, particularly if observed through the prolongation of certain effects and characteristics until beyond the new millennium. However, in the collective imagination, that turn of the century represented the triumph of individual economic success, the rise of great world finance, but also of small entrepreneurial initiative, and the advent of new and diversified forms of consumption.

However, rather than looking for a clear-cut caesura between the old and the new, the before and after the collapse of what has been called the «republic of parties» (Scoppola, 2021) in Italy, it is necessary today to consider that the crisis of that world, of that society, lies in a much deeper interweaving of time, history, international positioning, and traditions deeply rooted in the culture, customs, and common feeling of the country. To the extent that the start, between 1992 and 1994 - the year of Silvio Berlusconi's "take-over" - of a phase that is certainly different from the previous one, three decades later, presents a picture in which continuity and discontinuity interact much more than what the chronicle has so far been responsible for narrating.

Therefore, historical research and historiography are taking on the task of reconstructing with a different approach the nature, the causes, the protagonists of those events that led to the end of a long and stable political season renamed, in particular by the press, as the «First Republic». A point of fall that had in 1992 (Ravveduto, 2015 and 2022) the crossroads of this transition between past and present (Colarizi, 2022), a year that marked the beginning and end of an era (Dayan and Katz, 1993, pp. 238-239). Yet, it was during the «long decade» (the definition is in Quagliariello, 2004) of the 1980s that both the great economic and social changes in the West as a whole, and the reasons - exogenous and endogenous - necessary, but - we shall see - not sufficient prerequisite for the precipitation of events - took shape.

In this collective trauma, where history and memory still play different roles today, the party-democratic system fell, on the one hand, driven by internal forces - from the judiciary activism that unveiled unimaginable levels of corruption to the role of public opinion incited by the new television programmes (on the contamination between politics and television, Novelli, 2006 and 2016), projected at the same time as the swarming piazza and the living room of the homes of millions of Italians; from the race towards bankruptcy due to the public debt now out of control to the coeval need not to miss the train of the new European economic policy with the accession to the Maastricht Treaty; up to the Mafia's attack on the State, the climax of which was reached with the assassination of judges Falcone and Borsellino - and, on the other hand, on the evolution of external factors, the framework of which was the end of the Cold War, which represented for Italy the

exhaustion of the so-called «external constraint» (Gualtieri, 2001) and of the «blocked democracy». These factors contributed, individually and in a shared manner, to the emergence, in a relatively short but very intense period, of emotions, feelings and moods that were collective in the population but at the same time present in the feelings of each citizen, with the media - starting with the Fininvest group's commercial television channels and the first talk-shows - intent on constituting an enormous sounding board for the instincts, fears, indignation and anger of the "folk".[1] It was in that context that this new category took on a different presence: the folk. A category that like the people, is not divided into classes or social classes, but also assumes, in an even more indistinct manner, moral virtues, common sense, tradition (Trotta, 1995, pp. 32-43).

The interaction of at least four systemic crises - international, economic-financial, institutional, and political - represented the background against which the forward shift took place, where the mudslide on which the country was resting began to move, inexorably downwards and taking with it everything that was planted above (Cafagna, 2012). And the acceleration was undoubtedly provided by the effects of the collapse of the Soviet system from 1989 onwards: it applied to the whole of Europe, but to Italy in particular, due to its central position in the "Iron Curtain", where the Italian Communist Party was not only the protagonist of the founding of the Republic and its Constitution, but also the main shareholder of the democratic opposition to the Christian Democrats. The demise of one of the two models - the Communist one - that held up the Italian political and cultural clash also dragged with it the other supporting axis of the party structure, the Catholic party, which had made anti-Communism a useful glue to consolidate its power for over forty years (Colarizi, 2014, p. 337), positioning itself as the only alternative for the government of the country, a moderate barycentre to guarantee anti-Communism, even anti-fascism (Lupo, 2004; for a further development of the concept of anti-anti-fascism, Orsina, 2013). By emphasising vertical ideological fractures, the East-West contrast pushed the horizontal ones between the political elite and the people into the background during the post-war republican period (Orsina, 2014, p. 410): but having weakened the former, the latter found the freedom to re-emerge at the very beginning of the 1990s.

The karst river of sentiments adverse to the political system, but also a certain estrangement from the state, has accompanied Italian history since unification, towards the Twenty Years of Fascism and, having landed almost intact in the democratic phase, has been skilfully mastered by the Christian Democrat political and state power machine and the consensus block favoured by a *welfare state* in continuous expansion (for a reconstruction that takes into account cultural, historical and anthropological elements, Tullio-Altan, 1997). But in the 1980s, despite a second, reduced "economic miracle" (Rossi, 2020), the more or less marked adherence to the neo-liberal spirit of the decade put an end to the state mechanism of economic programming (on which part of the "pact" between the Communists and Christian Democrats had also been based), leaving room for the *self-regulating capacity of* the market and, at the same time, reducing the role of the public and its annexes as a great social shock absorber. The link with the global economy therefore took a fundamental step with the accession to the Maastricht Treaty and the ceding of greater areas of economic sovereignty to the European institutions, decreeing the progressive exhaustion of the so-called "activist project states" (Colarizi, 2020; Maier, 2014).

The decade was also marked by the fading away of the great mobilisations of the 1960s and 1970s and the consequent withdrawal into the private sphere, contributing to a shift in political commitment from economic and collective demands to the personal sphere, as a coherent development of the Sixty-Eight movement. But in essence, the shattering of interests, a consequence of the success of the *welfare state,* and a liberation of subjectivities and needs were nothing more than the results of these same conquests. Finally, the decline of the industrial society and the emergence of new economic actors - the so-called *Third Italy* (Bartolini, 2015) - contributed to re-dimensioning the political value of the 'factory', with all its legacy of class struggle, de-syndicalising and de-partisanising the workers, bringing their fate closer to the new figure of the 'worker-entrepreneur'.

Having said this, it is useful at this point to introduce the concept of populism that will follow in the following pages. In fact, the 1980s were a breeding ground for a populism producing «capitalism as a cultic economy that enshrines a normalised society in the immediate enjoyment through consumption. Its political economy of morality is based on the banalisation of good, the logic of waste and the politics of perversion». Populism as an advanced stage of neo-liberalism, for which Italy - midway between the global North and South - represented (and perhaps still represents today) a particularly favourable

---

1 The term "folk" is the closest in English to the Italian concept of "gente".

terrain. Although the outline of a possible case of an *ante litteram* left-wing populism in Italy - in the wake and antithesis of the right-wing, ethno-nationalist Lega Nord - will be examined later, it is appropriate to bear in mind the hypothesis that both may represent, in a certain sense, «a dialectical overcoming of neoliberalism» (Scribano, 2019, p. 175).

Within the framework of the changes outlined, the disappearance of the society that had been articulated on the production model at the centre of which was the role of large-scale industry in favour of small and medium-sized entrepreneurship and the service economy, threw into crisis, first and foremost, those who had built consensus and representation on the mobilisation of the working class. It was mainly the Italian Communist Party that was gradually eroded in its establishment by the ongoing social transformations. Berlinguer, secretary of the PCI until his death in 1984, understood before others that denouncing the inadequacy of the political system could have been a powerful tool for mobilising popular consensus. In particular, after the end of the process of encounter with the Catholic party begun with Aldo Moro - defined as the "historic compromise" and later, following the terrorist attack on the heart of the state, the "national solidarity" - which did not lead to a real and hoped-for legitimisation of the PCI as a possible governing force. The same project of the alternative, of the «pivot»'[2] of a government of the «capable and honest», through the call for *diversity* and the *moral question*, proved fruitless and led the communists to a platform of ethical claims that contributed to the formation of a more general resentment towards political subjects, institutions, and the state. It is necessary to start from here, from these changes, if we want to trace the origins of *morality* as an instrument of political battle and a fundamental impulse to that "populist moment" (Zanatta, 2002, pp. 273-277) that took shape in the crisis of the Republic.

Morality and the construction of the political: from the PCI (later PDS) to the Movement for Democracy – La Rete

In the years following the death of the communist secretary, the moral question, from its verifiable state, i.e. measurable as more and more corruption scandals linked to the party-dominated system started to emerge, began to take shape as the banner of the political clash,[3] a sort of "ideology of morality" available to those who began to "picket" the now fragile «republic of parties», as` well as to legitimise or delegitimise the adversary (Cammarano and Cavazza, 2010). This context also favoured the emergence of that "myth" of a healthy civil society (Lupo, 2000 and 2013; Saresella, 2016), as opposed to the political society of the parties, the only one capable of replacing the worn-out and corrupt ruling class - a narrative capable of enduring to this day - favouring, among others, the rise of Berlusconi, an entrepreneur "lent" to politics. Probably, it is already possible to identify here one of the most original stages of populism in Italy, «as the highest stage of neoliberalism implies the patrimonial enrichment of the leaders, the arrival of entrepreneurs in power and the transformation into entrepreneurs of politicians» (Scribano, 2019, p. 175). But that is another story and we will focus here on what came before.

In the world of the Italian Communists, the moral question was the background to the attempts to build a *third Italian way* between a still strong link with the ideological apparatus of Communism and a social democracy that could not, however, be considered enough. If until the first half of the 1980s - that is, until the defeat in the referendum on the "scala mobile" ("sliding-scale" cost-of-living adjustment which intended to abrogate the Craxi government's regulations limiting the mechanism of automatic adjustment of the purchasing power of wages in relation to inflation) - the PCI was stuck with a vision of society that hinged on the centrality of the workers (Colarizi, 2019, pp. 149-150), in the following years - leading up to the Bolognina turning point and the founding of the Democratic Party of the Left (Partito Democratico della Sinistra, PDS) - a movement began to move away from the field of economic and social demands in the direction of civil *issues*, such as women's rights, youth rights, peace, and the environment. It is no coincidence that the leadership group that began to gain more specific weight - both at the centre and in the federations (Ignazi, 1992) - over that decade was representative of that political generation that had grown up in 1968 and was imbued with individualism and hedonism, even though, for the most part, it was still convinced that it was operating in mass society. This distorted perception, like a sort of refraction of reality, pushed the PCI forward, towards a model of a "ass radical party", but looking backwards.

---

2 Istituto Gramsci, Italian Communist Party Archives, 1980, Direzione, meeting of 27 November 1980, mf. 8109, pp. 3-18.

3 See the monographic issue «Questione morale e politica. Problemi della transizione nella crisi europea di fine Novecento», in Memoria e ricerca, no. 32, 2009.

It was a common feature of the progressive parties - but for the PCI more evident precisely because it was outside the social-democratic tradition - to find an alternative to Marxism by shifting the emphasis from the working class now in crisis to the middle class, in particular by inserting an ethical soul to their political line: by insisting on rights, the progressive parties favoured the colonisation of the political by ethical and judicial logic (Orsina, 2020, pp. 132-135). A «genetic mutation» (Guiso, 2011, p. 201) of the Italian communist world that covered the entire decade, finding its fundamental stages in the encounter with the pacifist and environmentalist movement and, above all, with the incorporation into its political culture of the instrument of the referendum, which, after the one against the Valentine's Day decree, made a qualitative leap in communist strategy with the mobilisations against nuclear power (following the Chernobyl disaster) and the civil responsibility of magistrates first, and then those on electoral laws.

The moral question constituted an important thread, representing a consensus-building agent, a lever in the hands of old and new political subjects, an immediate and sobering discursive and rhetorical strategy that contributed to the spread of an atmosphere of «furious anti-political excitement» in society (Mastropaolo, 2005, pp. 158-165). Especially in a decade, that of the 1980s, in which scandals related to bribery and corruption were beginning to become widespread.

Morality, the core of what should have been "communist diversity", remained latent in the people of PCI, aroused when necessary against political opponents, Craxi in particular. He had good game, among other things, since Italian society was itself already an extremely fertile ground for severe moral judgments to take root against politicians and their respective parties: in the national political culture, «la retorica tesa a delegittimare partiti, classi politiche professionali, istituzioni rappresentative e relativi ludi cartacei» still constitutes a solid strand, exalting, on the other hand, the «immediate contact between the masses and the leader» (Lupo, 2000, p. 23; Tullio-Altan, 1997). This contributed to determining a fragile relationship of trust, always on the verge of collapse, in which the glue was not so much the mutual recognition between the people and the ruling class, as the majority presence in Italian electoral behaviour of the vote of belonging and the vote of exchange, to the detriment of the choices adopted on the basis of an opinion matured from a conscious or at least critical evaluation (Parisi and Pasquino, 1985, pp. 215-249).

In the phase in which democracy, in its concert of actors, is no longer able to offer adequate answers to the needs of vast strata of the population, i.e. whose expectations diverge beyond certain limits, a "populist moment" may arise. Citizens challenge the principle of delegation, starting from the fact that their expectations are disappointed beyond an acceptable limit. Populism is thus configured as a specific form of political mobilisation that differs both from the classical models of interest expression and from the political action channelled by political parties and, under certain conditions, it is possible to grasp its element as a reaction to the dysfunction of political systems (Meny, 2004, p. 370). As this "pact" breaks down, distrust expands and becomes massified, giving rise to three processes: «isolation in consumption is reinforced, institutional ties are redefined and scapegoats are generated. Isolation, self-centred life and intersubjective dissociation are effects of a process of long-term distrust. Immediate enjoyment through consumption reinforces the fantasy of a life where others only appear as vehicles of "my enjoyment". Distrust produces the fascination with the disconnected and self-sufficient oases as a model of subjectivity. Institutional relations change strongly in and through distrust. Plots of institutional reliability are resignified and there is a metamorphosis of institutional roles» (Scribano and Cervio, 2018, p. 195).

Returning to the theme of an increased demand for morality from both political subjects and citizens, the press, the *mass media*, it was not, on its own, a driving force capable of fuelling such an overwhelming discourse against politics. It was a *maximum common denominator* in the political arena, potentially capable of constructing what philosopher Ernesto Laclau calls a «floating signifier», i.e. a strong element of discourse capable of conceptually grasping its various logical shifts. In essence, a symbol capable of crystallising - at a given moment - the anti-establishment sentiments present in every society, regardless of the specific forms of articulation (Laclau, 2005, p. 125). However, the chain of equivalences that accompanied the moral question was as different as the cultural and political matrices that sought to ride it.

Although the communist critique of the dysfunctional state acquired its own originality, moving, among other things, into a space somewhere between morality and public ethics, those who successfully fanned the anti-political flames were the Leagues who, in 1989, merged into the Northern League (Lega Nord) and entrusted its leadership to Umberto Bossi: the initial ethno-regionalist protest

was transformed into a popular battle against the partyocracy. The originality of this new political formation was its ability to reinterpret regionalism in a populist key, constructing an appeal to the people understood both as *demos*, in the sense of common folk, of masses opposed to elites, and as *ethnos*, or as an ethnonational entity (Biorcio, 2015, ch. 3. Also, Allievi, 1992; Diamanti, 1996; Biorcio, 1997 and 2010). For these concise reasons, the Northern League has probably represented the main case study, particularly for historians and political scientists, on populism in Italy: until then, in fact, for about forty years after the Second World War - if we exclude the experience of the *Uomo Qualunque* movement and the particularity of the Achille Lauro phenomenon - populism was only present in the framework of Italian politics «in a latent form», without coagulating around one or more subjects capable of making it an effective instrument of political struggle (Tarchi, 2015, p. 207).

To have a history of contemporary populism in Italy in all its complexity, it is appropriate to understand whether and how a populist attempt distinct from the experience of the Northern League or Berlusconi's has also had its own particular origin. We therefore wonder whether there is a possibility that the themes and discourses proposed by some radical movements that developed between the 1990s and the first decade of the last century (from Di Pietro's party to the Girotondi, from the "Purple People" to the *Movimento 5 Stelle*) could find part of their roots precisely in that «long decade» we are discussing.

Laclau himself also distinguishes between a populism of the ruling classes, «which instrumentalise the appeal to the masses according to their own interests», and a populism closer to socialism, oriented from within the dominated classes (Taguieff, 2006, pp. 83-84). However, the concept of class, in this case, departs from its original formulation to embrace the people as the leading subject of change. One can speak in this regard of "left-wing populism" where its open and inclusive declination constitutes a possible way of rearticulating the political clash, capable of preserving and not weakening the forms of democracy in the years of its most acute systemic crisis (Damiani, 2020, p. 259).[4] This meaning can be found diachronically in the last half-century in those collective movements that have set themselves the generic objective of

challenging the hegemonic representations of the construction of socialites subordinate to neoliberal culture: «this kind of struggle is not new and rooted in the 1970s with new social movements, at a time of the progressive fall of industrial societies and their welfare state systems, fostering more attention to the individual. This happened in an international context of increasing globalisation and enhancing neoliberal policies on the wave of China's political overture to liberal economy, the Soviet Union's collapse, and the end of Cold War» (Farro and Rebughini, 2019, p. 145).

Within the proposed framework of reflections, two political experiences, both collective and individual, find their place: on the one hand, the PCI in its path of transformation into a party of the European left, outside the communist world, which resulted in the birth of the PDS, and the centrality of Achille Occhetto's "weak" leadership; on the other hand, the experience that gave birth in 1991 to the Movement for Democracy - La Rete, an attempt to overcome "from the left" the 20th-century ideologies, the result of both the legacy of the Sixty-Eight and the broader reception of the Second Vatican Council in the Catholic base, intolerant of the Christian Democrat umbrella, whose main political and media representative was the then mayor of Palermo, Leoluca Orlando.

Hypotheses on the origin of left-wing populism in Italy

The two subjects examined are part of a broader research in progress on the possibility that populist, or rather anti-political, elements can also be found in the field of the Italian left in the dialectic of opposition between the people and the elite. This is a working hypothesis, on which more questions than certainties can be offered today.

If most researchers agree that in Italy the populist field has been occupied mainly by right-wing parties, it is a sufficiently consolidated fact that in the last ten years the electoral success of the M5S has been determined by its ability to link its political proposal to at least two decades of debate on the corruption of the ruling classes (Farro and Rebughini, 2019, p. 153). Tracing the course of this river may, hypothetically, represent a path of investigation into the nature of a left-wing populism linked to morality, the demand for transparency, and public ethics, which, however, at a certain point in republican history overlapped with criticism and revulsion towards parties and their political representatives.

In the context from the collapse of the Berlin

---

4 In this regard, see Marc Lazar's considerations, according to which traces of populism can be found in left-wing parties and movements when they need to gather a healthy "people" to oppose a degraded institutional context: cf. Lazar, 1997, pp. 121-131.

Wall to the explosion of the investigations of the "Mani Pulite" pool, collective morality, having passed into the baptismal and purifying fountain of political and business scandals, took on an ethical air, as if the former world saw a clear separation between public and private, rather than their obvious and necessary intertwining: with the widespread indignation towards the corrupt and the corrupters, largely fuelled by the press, an entire people deluded itself into believing that it could somehow redeem itself from its vices precisely on the terrain of civil ethics (Scoppola, 2021, p. 477). In the overall degradation of collective ethics, institutions rose to the role of both "victims and executioners" in this process. With the key of populism, the way was opened to a gigantic collective absolution and removal of the political responsibilities that the judicial enquiries indirectly attributed to each voter (Cartocci, 1996, pp. 292-293).

In this vein can be inserted the *pars destruens* of Berlinguer's speech, according to which the parties had become «machines of power and clientele», without «civil passion», «federations of currents» each with «a "boss" and "under-bosses"», claiming the «diversity» of the PCI, which had not followed the parties in their «degeneration» because it had put the interests «of the working masses» and «of the marginalised strata of society» at the centre of its action.[5] At the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, it became even harsher, being flanked by the denunciation of an Italian democracy - as Occhetto put it - «emptied and deviated by dark, irresponsible, criminal powers»: the accusation was based on the fact that public life was burdened by «not only the devastating effects of the corruption that emerged from the Tangentopoli enquiries, but also the perverse intertwining and collusion between criminality and politics» (Orsina, 2018, p. 125).

In a similar way, but without the deep connection that the PCI/PDS had with a strong 20th-century political tradition such as communism, for the Rete moralising theme became what Laclau calls an *empty signifier*: the *moral question, while* remaining a single question, became at the same time the signifier of a broader universality, bringing with it a chain of «equivalential questions». In the Argentine philosopher's logic, such is the moment that precedes the construction of a people, its performative act, which he defines - for many questionably, but certainly in original terms - as populism.

It is conceivable how the profound public call for moralisation, aggravated by the crisis of the system, somehow constructed a people, or at least united an almost total majority of the population within a common denominator (Baldassari and Melegari, 2012; Mouffe, 2018; Cacciatore, 2019). It must nevertheless be taken into account that for the Rete the moral question was almost a *single issue* (i.e. this question assumed centrality in the equivalential chain, giving it representation, or naming, becoming a *signifier*), an absolute priority around which all others revolve (Ambrosi, 2014, p. 71). This was made particularly visible in the place that was not only the main centre of propagation of the movement, but also its symbol: Palermo.

The Sicilian capital represented a fertile meeting ground for peace movements, the young people who animated protests in schools and universities between 1985 and 1986, and, above all, the groups that went on to form the Anti-Mafia Coordination, a political place of resistance and participation in a city and region overwhelmed by Mafia power and violence.

In the same years, Jesuits Father Ennio Pintacuda and Father Bartolomeo Sorge were working in harmony in Palermo. Pintacuda, since the previous decade, had been the animator of the Centre for Social Studies of the Palermo Jesuits, at the head of which Father Sorge (since 1973 director of *La Civiltà Cattolica*) took over - for many at the direct wish of John Paul II. The appointment took place in the same days of the summer of 1985 in which Leoluca Orlando was elected mayor of the city (Gavini, 2019, p. 56).

Orlando was a politician with a well-established career behind him, which began in the late 1970s as a close collaborator of Piersanti Mattarella, when the latter served as president of the Sicilian region. After his assassination at the hands of the Mafia, Orlando made his way into the Christian Democrats, first as a municipal councillor in Palermo, then from 1985 as the city's mayor. Two years later, following the crisis of the majority that supported him, he inaugurated an innovative or anomalous administrative experience,[6] as it was called, first with a junta formed by part of the DC, Independent Left, Greens, Social Democrats and the Catholic civic list "Città dell'Uomo" and later with the external support of the Communist Party. For the leader of what was renamed the "Palermo Spring", it was not a question of a historic compromise, but of an experience that would strive to pursue the change expressed by civil society, in that context

---

5 Eugenio Scalfari, «Dove va il Pci? Intervista a Berlinguer», in la Repubblica, 28 July 1981.

6 According to Father Pintacuda, the political experience was immediately defined as "anomalous" because it had «programme contents as objectives» and was an expression more of the «living forces of society than of party secretariats» (Saresella, 2014, p. 221).

committed above all to the fight against the Mafia. In fact, the Palermo municipality represented a focal point in supporting the activities promoted by the Anti-Mafia Coordination (Schneider and Schneider, 1996, pp. 47-75). Moreover, the subsequent entry of the Communists into the council was intended to represent, on the one hand, the confirmation that the renewal of political action could pass through the assumption of the moral question as the central point of public life (Saresella, 2016, pp. 32-33), and on the other, the challenge that Orlando launched against the national DC, which in 1989 passed into the hands of the centre governed by the Forlani-Andreotti axis, marginalising De Mita's left wing (Gavini, 2019, § 13).

The path that led Orlando from the DC to the foundation of the new movement of the Rete was complex, but at the heart of it was the impossibility of "cleaning up" the Catholic party from the commingling with corruption and malfeasance that had by then become the rule in relations between politics, contracts, entrepreneurs, and public resources. In this journey, the theoretical elaboration of Father Pintacuda played a not secondary role. As he wrote in his *"Breve corso di politica"*:

«I giudizi di apprezzamento della politica, l'affezione o il distacco da essa, la sua crisi e l'opera di rivalutazione non riguardano qualcosa di astratto né si riferiscono a miti o a simboli generici ma, piuttosto, ad attività concrete svolte da uomini. […] La partitocrazia non ha il volto di un mostro sacro indefinibile ma è la risultante di attività messe in atto dagli uomini che fanno parte delle istituzioni politiche, i quali hanno potere all'interno di esse e ne guidano le sorti.

L'opera di rinnovamento nella società e la mobilitazione delle masse non scaturisce dai movimenti collettivi così come l'acqua sgorga dalle fonti ma è suscitata dai *leaders* che guidano e trascinano le masse. Inoltre, se oggi la questione morale si pone come uno dei fatti fondamentali della politica e se il nodo centrale di essa consiste nella reintegrazione del suo rapporto con l'etica, il problema non riguarda istituzioni anonime o entità organizzative a sé stanti, ma coloro i quali fanno parte di esse e ne sono a capo, prendono decisioni e sono capaci di responsabilità morali e penali» (Pintacuda, 1988, p. 173).

These words inspired the Rete's "Constituent Manifesto", which set out the objective of linking together «instances that are widespread in the social body of the country», in a "network" made up of associations, communities and volunteers, which for years had already placed at the centre of their

reflection and commitment the themes of the person and public ethics, the relationship between man and the environment and the relationship between civil society, parties and institutions. The party system, degenerated by the absence of alternation and by consociative practices, had become «a suffocating cloak for the fundamental freedoms of citizens», in the grip of «anti-democratic pressures coming from party oligarchies, from the growing presence of illegal economies and, in more brutal forms, from the occult and criminal mafia powers, which assault the rule of law almost undisturbed».[7]

Beyond the fortunes that the Rete movement had, Palermo represented its inspirational fulcrum, with the ambition of being the "capital of the new Italy", even the "Stage of Italy" (Pintacuda, 1986). Perhaps for a brief period it was. But it was also the theatre of the bloody Mafia attacks on judges Falcone and Borsellino, while the media spectacle against "dishonest" politicians moved to Milan, in front of the court and with the cameras pointed at the other three frontman judges of the "Mani Pulite" investigation, Di Pietro, Colombo and Davigo. A political economy of morality that changed its flow towards a series of practices that became, at that moment, the way of understanding and feeling events.

What was taking place represented the best moment for Italians to lash out at a political class to which, *obtorto collo*, they had been tied. Namely, when party loyalty was in retreat, the unhappy state of public finance had dried up the sources of clientelism, the end of the Cold War made defence against communism no longer necessary (Orsina, 2018, p. 143). And the stage trodden by the citizens offered them *immediate enjoyment*: «an act with totalizing pretensions that suspends the flux of everyday life», a form of appropriation over the individual that is «intense» but at the same time «superficial» that takes place at the moment of the «consumption» of the spectacularised product, «as they are practices with a totalizing pretension by and through which the individual subjectivizes the object re-constructing it in its structuring potency of vicarious experiences» (Scribano, 2017, p. 46).

This is not the place to draw conclusions, moreover of a research work, and the related archival perusal, that is still in progress. In any case, the considerations made so far are based on the hypothesis that, albeit within a common spirit, a hegemonic wind such as neo-liberalism, between the society of the individual and the fragmentation

---

7 "Manifesto Costitutivo del Movimento per la Democrazia La Rete" (now in Cantieri, 1993).

of ideologies from the 1980s onwards, a *left-wing populism* may have been produced - within the limits of the Italian case - starting from the end of the PCI's national communism and the decomposition of the political unity of Catholics, leading to the emergence of a civil society inclined to distrust political parties, intermediate bodies and the consolidated instruments of representative democracy.

Ultimately, the attempt to contextually analyse two apparently different experiences (the PCI/PDS and La Rete) (for a more in-depth analysis, Tesei, 2022) in the directions indicated is therefore trying to understand whether they were, each to their own extent, precursors of certain anti-political, protest-oriented, *rectius* populist thrusts, determining a link between the present and the past that is perhaps deeper than hitherto hypothesised in historiographic studies on the crisis of the Republic in Italy.

References

AMBROSI L., *«Il nemico è Andreotti». Il movimento La Rete e la questione morale dalle «due Dc» a Tangentopoli (1989-1992)*, in Di Giacomo M., Gori A. (eds). (2014). *Sguardi sulle prospettive della nuova ricerca storica. Persistenze o Rimozioni 3-2013.* Rome: Aracne.

ALLIEVI S. (1992). *Le parole della Lega: il movimento politico che vuole un altro Italia*. Milan: Garzanti.

ASQUER E., BERNARDI E., FUMIAN C. (eds). (2014). *L'Italia contemporanea dagli anni Ottanta a oggi. Il mutamento sociale.* Rome: Carocci.

BALDASSARI M., MELEGARI D. (eds). (2012). *Populismo e democrazia radicale: in dialogo con Ernesto Laclau.* Verona: Ombre Corte.

BARTOLINI F. (2015). *La terza Italia: reinventing the nation at the end of the 20th century*. Rome: Carocci.

BIORCIO R. (1997). *La Padania promessa*. Milan: il Saggiatore.

BIORCIO, R. (2010). *La rivincita del Nord: la Lega dalla contestazione al governo*. Bari: Laterza.

BIORCIO R. (2015). *Il populismo nella politica italiana: da Bossi a Berlusconi, da Grillo a Renzi*. Milan-Udine: Mimesis.

CACCIATORE F.M. (2019). *Il momento populista: Ernesto Laclau in discussione.* Milan: Mimesis.

CAFAGNA L. (2012). *La grande slavina: l'Italia verso la crisi della* democrazia. Venice: Marsilio.

CAMMARANO F., CAVAZZA S. (eds). (2010). *Il nemico in politica. La delegittimazione dell'avversario nell'Europa contemporanea*. Bologna: il Mulino.

CANTIERI R. (1993). *Rete Italia.* Trento: Publiprint.

CARTOCCI R. (1996). «Italy united by populism», in *Rassegna Italiana di Sociologia*, 3/1996.

COLARIZI S., CRAVERI P., PONS S., QUAGLIARIELLO G. (eds). (2004). *Gli anni Ottanta come storia*. Soveria Mannelli: Rubettino.

COLARIZI S., GIOVAGNOLI A., POMBENI P. (eds). (2014). *L'Italia contemporanea dagli anni Ottanta a oggi*, III. *Istituzioni e politica.* Rome: Carocci.

COLARIZI S. (2014) *Politica e antipolitica dalla Prima alla Seconda Repubblica*, in Colarizi S., Giovagnoli A., Pombeni P. (eds) *L'Italia contemporanea dagli anni Ottanta a oggi*, III. *Istituzioni e politica.* Rome: Carocci.

COLARIZI S. (2019). *Un paese in movimento. L'Italia negli anni Sessanta e Settanta.* Bari: Laterza.

COLARIZI S. (2022). *Passatopresente. Alle origini dell'oggi 1989-1994*. Rome-Bari: Laterza.

DAMIANI M. (2020) *Il populismo di sinistra, la variante europea*, in Masala A., Viviani L. (eds). *L'età dei populismi*, Rome: Carocci.

DAYAN D., KATZ E. (1993). *Le grandi cerimonie dei media*. Bologna: Baskerville.

DIAMANTI I. (1996). *La Lega. Geografia, storia e sociologia di un nuovo soggetto politico*. Roma: Donzelli.

FARRO A.L., REBUGHINI P. (2019) *The game of disillusion. Social movements and populism in Italy*, in Scribano, A., Korstanje, M. E., & Timmermann, F. (eds). *Populism and postcolonialism*. USA: Routledge.

GAVINI D. (2019). «L'utopia palermitana: i gesuiti nella "primavera" dell'antimafia», in *Laboratoire italien,* 22/2019. http://journals.openedition.org/laboratoireitalien/2837.

GUALTIERI R. (eds). (2001). *Il PCI nell'Italia repubblicana 1943-1991*. Rome: Carocci.

GUISO A. (2011) *Dalla politica alla società civile. L'ultimo Pci nella crisi della sua cultura politica*, in Acquaviva G., Gervasoni M. (eds). *Socialisti e comunisti negli anni di Craxi*: Venice: Marsilio.

IGNAZI P. (1992). *Dal Pci al Pds.* Bologna: il Mulino.

LACLAU E. (2005). *La ragione populista.* Rome-Bari: Laterza.

LAZAR M. (1997). «Du populisme à gauche: les cas français et italien». *Vingtième Siècle, revue d'histoire*, 56/1997.

LUPO S. (2000). «Il mito della società civile. Retoriche antipolitiche nella crisi della democrazia italiana», in *Meridiana. Rivista di storia e scienze sociali,* no. 38/39, November 2000.

LUPO S. (2004) *Antifascismo, anticomunismo e anti-antifascismo nell'Italia repubblicana*, in De Bernardi A., Ferrari P. *Antifascismo e identità europea.*

Rome: Carocci.

LUPO S. (2013). *Antipartiti: il mito della nuova politica nella storia della Repubblica (prima, seconda e terza).* Rome: Donzelli.

MAIER C. S. (2014). *Leviathan 2.0: Inventing Modern Statehood*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

MASTROPAOLO A. (2005). *La mucca pazza della democrazia. Nuove destre, populismo, antipolitica.* Turin: Bollati Boringhieri.

MATTERA P., UVA C. (eds.). (2012). *Anni Ottanta. Quando tutto cominciò. Realtà, immagini e immaginario di un decennio da ri-vedere.* Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino.

MENY Y. (2004). «La costitutiva ambiguità del populismo». *Political Philosophy*, 3/2004.

MOUFFE C. (2018). *Pour un populisme de gauche*. Paris: Albin Michel.

NOVELLI E. (2006). *La turbopolitica: sessant'anni di comunicazione politica e di scena pubblica in Italia. 1945-200.* Milan: BUR.

NOVELLI E. (2016). *La democrazia del talk show. Storia di un genere che ha cambiato la televisione, la politica, l'Italia.* Rome: Carocci.

ORSINA G. (2013). *Il berlusconismo nella storia d'Italia*, Venice: Marsilio.

ORSINA G. (2014) *L'antipolitica dei moderati. Dal qualunquismo al berlusconismo,* in Colarizi S., Giovagnoli A., Pombeni P. (eds). *L'Italia contemporanea dagli anni Ottanta a oggi*, III. Istituzioni e politica. Rome: Carocci.

ORSINA G. (2018). *La democrazia del narcisismo. Breve storia dell'antipolitica*. Venice: Marsilio.

ORSINA G. (2020) *La (auto)distruzione del politico, 1968-2008*, in Masala A., Viviani L. (eds). (*L'età dei populismi*, Rome: Carocci.

PARISI A., PASQUINO G. (1985) *Relazioni partiti-elettori e tipi di voto*, in Pasquino G. (eds). *Il sistema politico italiano.* Rome-Bari: Laterza.

PINTACUDA E. (1986). *Palermo palcoscenico d'Italia*. Palermo: F.lli Accetta.

PINTACUDA E. (1988). *Breve corso di politica.* Milan: Rizzoli.

PONS S., ROCCUCCI A., ROMERO F. (eds). (2014). *L'Italia contemporanea dagli anni Ottanta a oggi. La fine della Guerra fredda e globalizzazione.* Rome: Carocci.

QUAGLIARIELLO G. (2004) *Gli anni Ottanta: gli aspetti politico-istituzionali. Un'interpretazione*, in Colarizi S., Craveri P., Pons S., Quagliariello G. (eds). *Gli anni Ottanta come storia*. Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino.

RAVVEDUTO M. (eds). (2015). *1992. L'anno che cambiò l'Italia*. Rome: Castelvecchi.

RAVVEDUTO M. (eds). (2022) «Novantadue. Storia e memoria», *Diacronie. Studi di Storia Contemporanea,* 49(1).

ROSSI S. (2020). *La politica economica italiana dal 1968 a oggi.* Bari: Laterza.

SARESELLA D. (2014) *I cattolici democratici e la fine dell'unità politica dei cattolici*, in Colarizi S., Giovagnoli A., Pombeni P. (eds). *L'Italia contemporanea dagli anni Ottanta a oggi*, III. Istituzioni e politica. Rome: Carocci.

SARESELLA D. (2016). *Tra politica e antipolitica: la nuova società civile e il movimento della rete (1985-1994).* Florence: Le Monnier.

SCHNEIDER J., SCHNEIDER P. (1996). «Dalle guerre contadine alle guerre urbane: il movimento antimafia a Palermo», in *Meridiana*, 25/1996.

SCOPPOLA P. (2021). *La repubblica dei partiti. Evoluzione e crisi di un sistema politico. 1945-1996*, Bologna: Il Mulino.

SCRIBANO, A. (2017). *Normalization, enjoyment and bodies/emotions: Argentine sensibilities*. Nova Science Publishers, Inc.

SCRIBANO A., CERVIO A.L. (2018).*Distrust and Proximity: The Paradoxes of Violence in Argentina*, in Scribano A. *Politics and emotions*. Houston: Studium Press.

SCRIBANO, A. (2019).*Populism. The highest stage of neoliberalism of the twenty-first century?*, in Scribano, A., Korstanje, M. E., & Timmermann, F. (eds). *Populism and postcolonialism*. USA: Routledge.

SCRIBANO, A., KORSTANJE, M. E., & TIMMERMANN, F. (eds). (2019). *Populism and postcolonialism*. USA: Routledge.

TAGUIEFF P.A. (2006). *L'illusione populista.* Milan: Bruno Mondadori.

TARCHI M. (2015). *Italia populista. Dal qualunquismo a Beppe Grillo*. Bologna: il Mulino.

TESEI R. (2022). «Dal Pci al Pds, alla Rete: dinamiche populiste della sinistra italiana nella crisi della Repubblica», in *Diacronie. Studi di Storia Contemporanea,* 49(1).

TROTTA, M. (1995) *Il gentismo, malattia matura del populismo*, in Bianchi S. (eds).. *La sinistra populista. Equivoci e contraddizioni del caso italiano*. Rome: Castelvecchi.

TULLIO-ALTAN C.. (1997). *La coscienza civile degli italiani. Valori e disvalori nella storia nazionale*. Udine: Paolo Gaspari Editore.

ZANATTA L. (2002). «Il populismo. Sul nucleo forte di un ideologia debole». *Polis, Ricerche e studi su società e politica*, 2/2002.