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Right or/and Left? Overcoming Ideological Dualisms in Berlusconi's Italy

Vincenzo Binetti & Anna Camaiti Hostert

"Perhaps I got the wrong ideology," said the main character in one of Nanni Moretti's early films. The doubt was raised concerning the possibility of a proper understanding of Marx's *Capital* and was meant to address some of the theoretical and practical knots that bear upon the problem of subjective identification with a particular *Weltanschauung* on the part of those who thought they belonged to a specific political field, namely the left.

Though stated ironically, this utterance by one of the Italian filmmakers who actually did face the cogent issue of "belonging" can represent our first step toward questioning the validity of an ideological separation between "right" and "left."

At first sight, the passage in Italy from the First to the Second Republic meant a concrete redefinition of the institutional setup effected through structural changes in the electoral and governing system, at the same time marking irreparably the end of *consociativism*. This transformation, which on the Italian arena took on a recognizable physiognomy and dynamics, falls nevertheless within a broader process of **detritorialization** of the areas formerly occupied by politics and a **globalization** of information which affects the complexity of technological processes on the threshold of the third millennium. The appearance in the political scenario of "new" figures and parties¹ who in the aftermath of the March 27, 1994, "turn," proposed an electoral program based on a pragmatism that broke through the verbosity and alchemy of the First Republic, has had decisive repercussions. On the one hand, they attracted the majority of the votes the Italians cast, and on the other, before the reflexively demagogic attitude of the political line-up that opposed it,² they determined an extreme polarization of the political battlefield. This has created and continues to fuel a tight and incendiary debate both on the strictly political plane as well as on the cultural and theoretical level. Not since the high points of the "cold war" has Italy witnessed, in the interventions by politicians and intellectuals alike, the obsessive recurrence of the terminological antitheses

such as "right" and "left," or "fascism" and "communism."

Most recently, the pages of dailies and periodicals are taken up with the Bobbio "case," spurred by the appearance of a short essay whose emblematic title reads, literally translated: *Right and Left: Reasons and Meanings of a Political Distinction*.³ The issue revolves around the legitimacy of that ideological separation which for the past two centuries has represented and distinguished the positioning of the political formations within the constitutional arc of Western democracies.⁴ In his opuscle, Bobbio grounds this difference on the concept of *equality*, claiming it serves as the metahistorical principle which identifies the attitudes and diverse positions assumed by left and right:

The most frequently adopted criterion to distinguish the right from the left is the different attitude that people living in a society assume before the ideal of equality, which together with that of liberty and of peace is one of the ultimate ends they intend to attain and for which they are willing to fight.⁵

What follows from this is that the idea which characterizes the left is, according to Bobbio, *egalitarianism*, understood not as the utopia of a society in which all individuals are equal in everything, but as a tendency to render more **equal** the **unequal**.⁶ Having suggested a theoretical angle with both categorical and substantive consequences, Bobbio's dyad raised a storm among the Italian intelligentsia, which readily took positions for and against it, rather than further problematizing the complex problem addressed.

Among those who intervened in the debate, Alessandro Pizzorno's response in "La Repubblica," where the sociologist suggests replacing Bobbio's binary copula **equality-inequality** with one we find more appropriate and problematic, that of **inclusion-exclusion**, is worthy of comment. Pizzorno writes:

From the point of view of the individual-ethic, more than the equality he [Bobbio] talks about, which is founded on the metaphor of high-low, above-below, we ought to analyze the couple inside-outside, inclusion-exclusion. I find it strange that Bobbio ignores precisely this metaphor which is by far the one that counts the most for the individual. At bottom, the individual does not really have the problem of being higher or lower in a given reference scale such as that of income. What matters to the individual is knowing whether he is excluded or accepted, whether or not he is considered as being equal to the others.⁷

Pizzorno's suggestion marks the limits of a terminological separation which underscores an idea of rationality wherein the relationship among the categories follows a hierarchical scheme already con-

tained in the concept of reason that has produced them. In other words, reason becomes once again metahistorical and is identified with the post-French Revolution mythic-symbolic tradition.

Pizzorno's inclusion-exclusion dyad is even more problematic than Bobbio's, insofar as it unfolds dynamically along a horizontal rather than vertical trajectory, while its notion of rationality is only apparently more context-sensitive. The implied diffusion of the spatial dimension is in fact more attuned to the fragmentation of that Hegelo-Marxian principle of totality which had served to found the project of a politics which is no longer possible. Yet far from identifying his position with that of Luhmann, according to whom the universe of politics becomes simply the practical administration of the everyday, Pizzorno insists on an approach which is just as ideological, casting the inclusion-exclusion couple once again in metahistorical and objective terms. Pizzorno's thesis falls right back into a dialectic that presupposes the centrality and integrity of a body/system. In this view, both those who live outside of it as well as those who live within it but in a condition of social, economic, and cultural "quarantine," will always yearn and strive for a salvific integration that would "cure" them.

We feel instead that, whether as individuals or as groups, and beyond their specific dislocation in the social context,⁸ subjects have the unalienable right to choose to identify and recognize themselves in a "marginality" or "exclusion" which is actually desired and not at all imposed or suffered.

If we accept this thesis, we may disclose some real possibilities of escaping the vampiresque grip of the rationality of the social system. The primary objective is then to refuse to relinquish the spaces of untapped freedom lodged within the notion and condition of **auto-exclusion**. On this account, Franco Berardi underscores the importance of the idea of **flight** as both the centrifugal moment of **nomadism** and the temporary release from various subliminal systemic and informatic constrictions:

But...it is precisely the thickening of communication and technology, precisely the creation of cabled and self-sufficient net-systems, precisely the digitalization of the rapport with the material world which disclose a new phenomenon: the freeing-up of small unities, mobile, intelligent, autonomous. It is the disengaging of desocialized singularities. Singularity here does not mean individuals, but social subsets in a state of subtraction. But subtraction means...disempowerment, singular ethical radicalism, ineffectual impeccability, yet consistent in itself. The paradox of freedom.⁹

This last reference calls to mind what Hakim Bey calls the T.A.Z. (Temporary Autonomous Zone),¹⁰ wherein mobile entities appear out of nowhere, "hit" the chosen target and then through other stratagems, just vanish. The elements that link Bifo's position to Bey's in the context of today's "global village" are represented by mass media networks such as Internet, Web, TV, and computer-related activities which make *virtual reality* an unavoidable component of contemporary life.

It is not by chance that even in the context of a technologically "provincial" country such as Italy, the emergent political figure would be a television mogul, and one with "great communicative skills."

It is well known, in fact, that Silvio Berlusconi launched his electoral campaign by mobilizing his media empire and effectively influencing the results at the voting booth, but it would undoubtedly be reductive to attribute his victory exclusively to this element. On the other hand, justifying the events on the basis of motivations that aspire to be "ideological" is also too much. In fact, this is a golden opportunity to do away, yet again, with Gramsci's concept of ideology.¹¹

The Berlusconi "phenomenon" cannot be too easily assessed, requiring instead a more complex analysis. It cannot be denied, however, that a general malcontent was made manifest in various guises, symptomatic of a crisis of values which is deep and irreversible. On this we are in agreement with Alberto Abruzzese when he writes that

Berlusconi...serves to unsettle from the Enlightenment presumption to divide the sun from the moon, black from white, the left from the right....Never announce clear facts, but uncertainty. To choose to speak about Berlusconi in order to grasp the indecision in which we wallow: all of us, him included. These pages are written for those capable of doubting and willing to change their mind. An attempt to create a new etiquette for who loves the present time.¹²

What's the sense, then, of debating about the distinction between "right" and "left" when what's really at stake in this context is the very redefinition of the semantic and categorical universe of political discourse? After all, these categories are historically outdated, they are of little use in this radical effort to rethink and **remap** social and cultural reality. In fact, left and right imply "taking a stand" which is no longer politically in tune with the development of party structures, nor does it make sense in terms of the interlocking systems of the media. More than that, left and right are no longer sufficient to problematize the processes of **deterritorialization** and **nomadism**.

Massimo Ilardi writes:

Flight as the ultimate attempt to save oneself from the State and from work, both of which push [the individual] ineluctably toward the world of the ever-the-same. Flight as nomadism, a radical event that shatters the general discourse on finality....There are no strong identities to conquer, nor loyalties to uphold, but only limited goals to attain. Conflict is fragmented, it becomes personal. It represents thus the most simple concentration. It becomes the expression of the irreducible impossibility on the part of individuals to renounce their freedom for the sake of class or group interests.¹³

We must then ask ourselves once again whether it is any longer useful to deploy binary concepts such as, in this specific case, left/right, and communism/fascism, or others like male/female, strong/weak, winning/losing. Instead, as Homi Bhabha reminds us, the history of marginalized subjects begins from a non-place and seeks to arrive at a post-isms phase which ultimately erases any trace of belonging. Concerning the specific case of feminism, however, we feel we cannot as yet speak of a **post** phase insofar as the dyad male/female represents an element in dire need of further thinking beyond that called for by the other conceptual couplets.

The male/female dichotomy constitutes the main criterion toward a reflection aimed at destabilizing not only the most intimate fiber of our society, but more generally, the foundations upon which Western culture rests in its entirety. Moreover, it is necessary to add that when we speak of male/female we are not speaking solely of a difference between men and women, which reeks of essentialism, but also of the race and class differences that exist among women themselves.¹⁴

To comprehend this mode of destabilizing the representation of women, consider Donna Haraway's *cyborgs* (cybernetic hominids made up of organic and technological parts). It is a most efficacious way of disorienting the overbearing influence of the male/female distinction in Western narrative.

From another corner, Mario Perniola has felt the need to invent the category of "the sentient being" [*cosa che sente*, literally 'a thing that feels'] in order to theoretically revisit the modalities of the perception of the real. Among his examples in this context, he urges us to clarify the notion of a *horizontal* aspect of female pleasure and sexuality as opposed to the *vertical* peaks of the male orgasm. He writes:

The alliance between the senses and things allows access to a neutral sexuality which entails a suspension of feeling [sentire]: this is not the

annulment of sensibility, which in turn would imply the slackening of all tension, but the entrance into a dislocated experience, freed from the objective of having to obtain a result. To feel like a sentient being, a thing that feels, means above all emancipating oneself from an instrumental conception of sexual excitation whose sole objective is reaching an orgasm....[This alliance between senses and things] liberates sexuality from nature and entrusts it to artifice, which discloses a world no longer obsessed with the differences among sexes, forms, sensible appearance, beauty, age, and race.¹⁵

Let us ask again, therefore: does it make sense, on the threshold of the third millennium, in an age in which we speak of the end of ideology, the death of communism and the creation of fascist “pseudo-memories,” to continue to ask what are the evocative referents behind the memories of those who like us have lived the “assault on the sky” as a felicitous moment during the dreams of utopia? Or, as Baudrillard says:

With this we step beyond history into pure fiction, into the illusion of the world....Now that the aristocratic illusion of the origin and the democratic illusion of the end are receding from view, we no longer have the choice to move on, to persevere in the present destruction, nor can we back up, but solely face this radical illusion.¹⁶

So, then, does it make sense to continue to speak of a “left” and/or a “right”?

[1997]

NOTES

1. The Polo della Libertà included three parties: Forza Italia, Lega Nord, and Alleanza Nazionale, led respectively by Berlusconi, Bossi and Fini. The first was at his debut as an emerging political force, the second embodied the recent dissatisfaction with the ruling class and the “palazzo,” and the third was a figure of apparent reconsideration in a “democratic” key of the former MSI (Movimento Sociale Italiano).

2. The Polo Progressista was constituted by the PDS (Partito Democratico della Sinistra, the vaguely liberal reformist wing born out of the ashes of the former PCI), the Verdi (the environmentalists), Alleanza Democratica (a new formation that subsumed “liberal” forces from an area that can be defined as democratic and on the left), and Rifondazione Comunista (the extreme wing of the former PCI).

3. Norberto Bobbio. *Destra e Sinistra. Ragioni e significati di una distinzione politica*. Roma: Donzelli, 1994.

4. See on this Ernesto Galli Della Loggia. *Intervista sulla destra*. Bari: Laterza, 1994. In this agile pamphlet the author reconstructs the history of the right in Italy and in Europe from the French revolution to the present, highlighting its relation of complementarity with the left.

5. N. Bobbio. *Destra e sinistra*. cit., p. 71.
6. Ibid. p. 79.
7. Gnoli, Antonio. "Caro Bobbio, ecco dove sbagli," interview with Alessandro Pizzorno in *La Repubblica*, 7 February, 1995, p. 26.
8. We are thinking in particular of the notion of "location" as theorized by Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London & New York, Routledge, 1994.
9. Berardi, Franco. *Il paradosso della libertà*. Bologna: Agalev, 1990, p. 32.
10. See Hakim Bey. *T.A.Z. Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism*. Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 1985.
11. Cf. Antonio Gramsci. *Il materialismo storico e la filosofia di Benedetto Croce*. Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1971.
12. Abruzzese, Alberto. *Elogio del tempo nuovo. Perché Berlusconi ha vinto*. Genova: Costa & Nolan, 1994, p. 27.
13. Ilardi, Massimo. "Conflitti," in M. Ilardi, ed. *La sinistra nel labirinto. Lessico per la Seconda Repubblica*. Genova: Costa & Nolan, 1994, pp. 40-1.
14. See, among others, Teresa De Lauretis, "The Essence of the Triangle or Taking the Risk of Essentialism Seriously: Feminist Theory in Italy, the U.S. and Britain" in a 1989 issue of *Differences*.
15. Perniola, Mario. *Il sex appeal dell'inorganico*. Torino: Einaudi, 1994, pp. 4-5.
16. Baudrillard, Jean. *L'illusione della fine o lo sciopero degli eventi*. Milano: Anabasi, 1993, p. 165.