We must stress the importance and significance that political parties have in the modern world in the elaboration and diffusion of conceptions of the world in that essentially they elaborate the ethics and the politics in conformity with [those conceptions] – that is, they function almost as historical ‘experimenters’ of those concepts.

Antonio Gramsci

...the history of ideas is one thing, and real politics is another. These are two separate worlds, which do not cross and do not overlap, but proceed alongside each other without ever meeting.

Norberto Bobbio

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1 I am indebted to Giovanni Capoccia, Samuel Moyn, Edmund Neill nd Gianfranco Poggi for comments and suggestions; special thanks to Paolo Pombeni, Mario Ricciardi and Nadia Urbinati for extensive and extremely helpful reactions to an earlier version and for many useful hints. All mistakes are mine. The section on the Marxist Schmittiani is adapted from my A Dangerous Mind: Carl Schmitt in Post-War European Thought (London, 2003).

2 Quoted in N. Bobbio, Ideological Profile of Twentieth-Century Italy (Princeton, 1995), p. 164.

Post-war Italy presents in many ways a unique political constellation in post-war Western Europe: like West Germany, it was post-authoritarian, under heavy American influence, a ‘front state’ in the Cold War that by many accounts merely possessed ‘limited sovereignty’; but unlike the Federal Republic of Germany, Italy exhibited a highly unstable, some might say dysfunctional, form of parliamentary politics, with rapidly changing governments, as well as widespread corruption and clientelism — which nonetheless co-existed with an unrivalled form of continuity: nowhere else was one party — namely the Italian Christian Democrats — always in power. Obviously, the DC was kept in mostly to keep the Communists out — in other words, the Cold War prevented a minimal, in a sense Schumpeterian function of democracy to work: the circulation of elites.\textsuperscript{4} The absence of any real alternanza explained many of the political pathologies of the Republic, and even attempts to change the constellation of party forces somewhat — Bettino Craxi’s 1980s project to end the hegemony of the DC and permanently install his socialist party as the arbiter of political life — turned out to be quasi-feudal in that money was spread around to reconcile some of the political players to a partial changeover of elites.\textsuperscript{5}

The importance of the conventio ad excludendum points to a second peculiarity of the Italian situation: arguably nowhere else did Communism flourish for such a long time both as a party and as a form of political theorizing that had gained significant distance from Moscow, but not necessarily broken with Leninism or, generally, an insurrectionary approach to politics. As Martin Jay has rightly pointed out, ‘no national Marxist culture

\textsuperscript{4} I owe this specific observation — and formulation — to Nadia Urbinati.

\textsuperscript{5} I am indebted to Paolo Pombeni on this point.
after World War II was as rich and vital as that which emerged from the ashes of Mussolini’s Italy’. The PCI was the West’s largest Communist party; Eurocommunism appeared most credible in Italy and, with the exception of France, came closer to actual national government power than Communism anywhere else in Western Europe – in fact, the PCI de facto engaged in a form of consociativismo and, both in the late 1940s, and in the late 1970s, was ready to prove its loyalty to a DC-led government during a ‘national emergency’.

Furthermore, and quite apart from the major role of the PCI, no other European country has thrown up as many radical popular movements from below – all against the background of an unbroken continuity in conservative rule at the top: a unique combination of ‘social insurgency and political immobility’. In particular, nowhere else, one might say, did ‘May’ last that long: in other words, nowhere else was the political, social, cultural and, not least political-philosophical upheaval that is often abbreviated as ‘May 1968’ as drawn-out as in Italy (some observers have even spoken of a ‘creeping

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7 Of course the Communists did regularly govern in the central regions of Italy Tuscany, Umbria and Emilia-Romagna, but also in the cities of Rome and Naples – again, a phenomenon without parallel anywhere else in Western Europe. For the modello consociativo see M. Salvati, ‘Behind the Cold War: rethinking the left, the state and civil society in Italy (1940s-1970s), in: Journal of Modern Italian Studies, Vol. 8 (2003), pp. 556-577.

May’). What Italians came to call a period of contestazione lasted at least until the end of the 1970s and produced an enormously rich and diverse (and, some would say, confused and confusing) outpouring of radical political thought. Precisely because of this longue durée it was credible for a theorist like Antonio Negri to claim that revolutionary experience and its theoretical formulation could proceed together – as opposed to theory having to precede praxis, or theory always trying to catch up with a fleeting moment that might not have lasted even a month (as allegedly was the case with France).

Also, only in Italy did the post-1968 political languages of anti-authoritarianism and older idioms of class conflict come together in a sustained manner – even if there were also major tensions between Old and New Left, between workers and the movimento studentesco, between Maoist and other radical left-wing groups and the Communist Party. And the theoretical legacy of ‘68 and after is far from dead: in fact, many of the political ideas first developed in the highly charged 1970s were to be recycled in contemporary debates on globalization and ‘empire’, mostly through the work of Antonio Negri. As Negri’s American collaborator Michael Hardt asserted:

In Marx’s time revolutionary thought seemed to rely on three axes:

German philosophy, English economics, and French politics. In our time

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11 D. Della Porta, Social movements, political violence, and the state: A comparative analysis of Italy and Germany (New York, 1995).
the axes have shifted so that, if we remain within the same Euro-American framework, revolutionary thinking might be said to draw on French philosophy, U.S. economics, and Italian politics.12

There is something to this stylized account, and one might wonder just why a, broadly speaking, post-Marxist Left has found the 1970s a particularly inspiring period or perceived it as somehow prefiguring the politics of the early twenty-first century.

At the same time, nowhere else has a current of thought that one might broadly call ‘postmodern political disenchantment’ been as consistently articulated as in Italy: it seems that precisely because of the high expectations raised by contestazione – and, much earlier, by the wartime Resistance – have the stasis and decline of the Italian political system, and also the superficial political showmanship first of Bettino Craxi, then of Silvio Berlusconi – led to such political despair. At the risk of a facile paradox one might say that ‘weak thought’ was nowhere else as strong as in Italy (again, with the possible exception of France). In one sense, then, the history of post-war Italian political thought is a narrative of successive disappointments of what Norberto Bobbio called ‘ethical enthusiasms’.13

Finally, as Perry Anderson has pointed out, nowhere else in Europe did liberalism retain such a radical potential – not despite, but because of the late unification of Italy under officially liberal auspices and the obvious corruption of actual liberal politics with

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13 Bobbio, Ideological Profile, p. 159.
nineteenth-century trasformismo (the system of mutual favours and ‘gentlemen’s agreements’ that kept the same business and landowning elites in power over decades, but also served to co-opt newly powerful social groups and sideline ideologically committed parties).\textsuperscript{14} Liberalism remained essentially unconsummated, as far as its normative potential was concerned, and thus was available, if one may put it that way, for ideological affairs among strange bedfellows: liberal socialism, social liberalism, liberal

\textsuperscript{14} P. Anderson, ‘The Affinities of Norberto Bobbio’, in \textit{New Left Review}, no. 170 (July-August 1988). As in other European contexts, the semantics of liberalism are complex, especially, but only after 1945: Bobbio was clearly seen as a man of the Left, and the designation ‘liberal’ is one that makes more sense from a contemporary American or, at most, British perspective; in post-war Italy itself liberalism was usually perceived as conservative or at least as simply advocacy of the free market, and ‘liberalism’ for many on the Left was a dirty word (though not nearly as dirty as ‘conservative’, which was wholly rejected by Christian Democrats). Last but not least – and just to complicate matters further -- liberalism could also more plausibly than anywhere else be seen as having been complicit with fascism: after all, Gentile called himself a liberal and for a while presented fascism as a form of liberalism. Finally, to get a sense of the complicated semantics of liberalism in the present one only need to puzzle over the remainders of the Radical party which now calls itself a ‘movimento liberale, liberista, libertario’. Thanks to Paolo Pombeni and Mario Ricciardi on this point. For the relationship between contemporary Italian political thought and English-language analytic liberal theory, see M. Ricciardi, ‘Political philosophy across the Atlantic: a difficult relationship?’, in: \textit{Journal of Modern Italian Studies}, Vol. 10 (2005), pp. 59-77; for the question how to think about liberalism and liberalization in Westen Europe more generally after 1945 see M. Lilla, ‘The Other Velvet Revolution: Continental Liberalism and its Discontents’, in: \textit{Daedalus}, Vol. 123 (1994), pp. 129-57.
revolution, and even liberal communism made sense in an Italian context -- when they would have seemed like outright political oxymorons elsewhere.\textsuperscript{15}

In this essay I would like to analyze the three broad strands of Italian post-war political thought in their historical and more narrowly institutional and party-political context: Christian Democracy, the Left, both in its official Communist variant and in its many radical and unorthodox Marxist instantiation in the 1970s and 1980s, and, finally, the smaller, but important trends in liberal (soi-disant or not) political philosophy – with Norberto Bobbio as obviously the main exponent. I will also say a few words about ‘weak thought’, but without being able to do justice to the complexity of a philosophical position such as Gianni Vattimo’s.

Among these three major phenomena Christian Democracy is arguably the one least studied by political theorists and historians of political ideas, and its inclusion requires a few words of justification. The relative neglect of Christian Democracy might partly be due to the perceived dullness of Christian Democratic parties and politicians; but more likely it is explained by the fact that many observers in the English-speaking world never took Christian Democracy seriously as a proper set of political ideas in the first place – an impression that was only reinforced by the revelations about corruption and clientelism during tangentopoli (literally ‘kickback city’ – a metaphor for the

\textsuperscript{15} In the same vein, the 1948 constitution contained what many perceived as unfulfilled progressive promises and what Paul Ginsborg has called ‘an official morality – democratic, anti-fascist, constitutional, European’; thus the PCI actually became one of its major advocates, appearing as significantly more liberal than Communist parties elsewhere in Western Europe. See P. Ginsborg, ‘Explaining Italy’s crisis’, in: The New Italian Republic, eds. S. Gundle and S. Parker (London, 1996), p. 24
widespread corruption uncovered in the early 1990s). While it is hard to deny that the Cold War, massive American support and the de facto colonization of the Italian state by the DC were decisive in ensuring the party’s iron grip on power until the early 1990s, the role of ideas cannot simply be discounted. Some ideological conglomerate had to be fashioned that was credible against the background of the Fascist experience, appear as genuinely universalist-Catholic (but not simply as submission to Church dogma), and yet also particularly Italian.16

I shall conclude that what has been pointed to as characteristics of modern Italian social and political thought in general – namely profound anxieties about social integration, about the cohesion of state and society, and about the relationship between intellectuals and ‘the masses’ – no doubt also apply to many debates and ideological developments after the Second World War.17 But, contrary to some outside observers’ claims, not every Italian political thinker is somehow a nation-builder of one sort or another, and not everyone conceives of political philosophy as the autobiography of the Spirit, or the nation, or one’s times, or even the individual.18 In the post-war period Italy was a unique laboratory for ideological mixtures and alliances that were not available elsewhere; mixing metaphors, one might say that Italian political thought spanned and

16 Given current debates about the limits and possibilities of ‘Muslim Democracy’ (in analogy with Christian Democracy), the question of how religious ideas were adapted to particular national politics in particular historical circumstances in fact turns out to be highly relevant. On this topic see for instance V. Nasr: ‘The Rise of “Muslim Democracy”’, The Journal of Democracy, Vol. 16 (2005), pp. 13-27.

17 R. Bellamy, Modern Italian Social Theory: Ideology and Politics from Pareto to the Present (Cambridge, 1987)

covered the entire map of possible major twentieth-century European ideologies. Christian Democracy, Communism and Socialism, liberalism and even fascism (albeit now as ‘neo-fascism’) all remained in political play after 1945; thus Italy might be said to be a kind of microcosm of the various possibilities, missed opportunities and limits in what the German historian Karl Dietrich Bracher once called ‘the age of ideologies’. More particularly, Italy was an experiment in a special role for mass parties as carriers of political thought and moral authority, and as agents of democratization, given the overall weakness of the state, and rather low levels of civicness. In a sense, all post-war parties modeled themselves on the Fascist Party as mediating between a strong society and a weak, or at least highly fragmented, state, and as mediating between center and periphery.

Finally – and this goes some way to explaining the continued fascination exerted by Italian political thought in the present – the oscillation between extreme political realism (think Mosca and Pareto in the twentieth century) and extreme idealism (Gentile, for instance) is arguably also a peculiarity of Italian political thought. The potential, limits and, not least, meaning of politics itself has constantly been probed by cold realists on the one hand, and, on the other, those trying to turn political life as much as possible into ethical life. Italy – highly polarized and politicized in one sense, deeply disengaged and familial and privatistic in another – has not allowed for complacency in political

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20 Togliatti, for instance, claimed that ‘the parties constitute democracy in its organizational process’.

21 Salvati, ‘Behind the Cold War’.
thinking, and time and again called for theorizing the very concept, as well as the boundaries, of the political in new ways.\textsuperscript{22}

\textbf{Christian Democracy: From Personalism to Political Plunder}

Christian Democracy is arguably one of the most significant innovations in twentieth-century European political thought as a whole. To be sure, Christian Democracy has its roots in the late nineteenth century, in particular the encyclical \textit{Rerum Novarum}; there Leo XIII for the first time addressed the social question from a particularly Catholic perspective and paved the way for corporatism and social action as particularly Catholic solutions. However, only with the complete lifting of \textit{Non Expedit} (the papal prohibition on Italian citizens to participate in the politics of the Italian nation-state) towards the end of 1918 did Christian Democracy become a major political – and intellectual – force outside Belgium and Germany (where the Catholic \textit{Zentrum} played an important role both in the Empire and the Weimar Republic). On January 18th 1919 the priest and local politician Luigi Sturzo, a disciple of Romolo Murri, founded the Popular Party (\textit{Partito Popolare Italiano}) with the appeal \textit{A tutti i liberi e forti} (To all free and strong men).

\textsuperscript{22} Witness for instance Bobbio claiming: ‘One cannot cultivate political philosophy without trying to understand what is beyond politics, or without venturing into the non-political sphere, and attempting to establish the boundaries between the political and the non-political.’ N. Bobbio, \textit{In Praise of Meekness: Essays on Ethics and Politics}, trans. T. Chataway (Cambridge, 2000), p. 28.
Sturzo saw pluralism, solidarity, agricultural reform and Catholic political action not based on direct orders from the Church as the founding principles of the PPI.23

The party immediately became the second-largest in Italy after the Socialists; it played a somewhat unfortunate role, to say the least, in its relation to Fascism, with some of its politicians joining the first Mussolini government alongside Liberals. The Vatican itself had an ambiguous relationship with the party; its secretary had initially called it the ‘least bad’ of all Italian parties; and eventually the Holy See turned against Sturzo and supported factions and rival groups that were unquestioningly prepared to collaborate with Mussolini.24 The PPI was dissolved in 1926, and its main leaders and theoreticians had to go into some form of exile – Alcide de Gasperi, the last party secretary and the first DC prime minister post-1945, found shelter in the Vatican library; Sturzo himself lived in New York for most of the ventennio nero (the two ‘black decades’ of Fascist rule) and kept advocating ‘personalism’, ‘pluralism’ and ‘institutionalism’ as the philosophical pillars of Christian Democracy.25 Nevertheless, Catholic Action – which had been important for the PPI, but was to become even more crucial in mobilizing

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support for the DC – continued to function as essentially the only non-fascist social organization.26

After Mussolini’s fall Catholics re-grouped and collaborated with Communists and Liberals on the National Liberation Committee. De Gasperi in particular sought out former members of the PPI in order to fashion a party and a programme which would not repeat the mistakes of the past and build a genuine consensus around a shared political culture. More importantly, de Gasperi -- who was personally pious, but absolutely not interested in theological questions – sought to keep a distance from papal authority, while trying not to fall out with the Vatican in the way the PPI was perceived to have done.27

But they also followed the direction of a number of European Catholic thinkers who had led the way in embracing democracy, human rights and at least some aspects of modernity. Crucial here had been the work of Jacques Maritain. As is well known, Maritain had been close to the quasi-fascist Action Française in the 1920s, but had abandoned the movement when it was condemned by the Vatican in 1926. Working throughout in a neo-Thomist philosophical framework, he started in the late 1930s to embrace human rights and modern democracy.28 In particular, his 1936 study

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26 Ibid. Also important were students organizations like the Federazione universitaria cattolica italiana (FUCI), from which many postwar DC leaders were to emerge.

27 On the formation of de Gasperi’s political thought, especially through his experiences in the Habsburg Empire, see P. Pombeni, Il primo De Gasperi. La formazione di un leader politico 1881-1918 (Bologna, 2007).

Humanisme Intégrale and his 1942 pamphlet Christianity and Democracy – which was dropped by Allied planes over Europe – had constituted a cautious, but in the development of Catholic thought nevertheless decisive, endorsement of the ultimately Christian nature of democracy. As Maritain put it:

…the important thing for the political life of the world and for the solution of the crisis of civilization is by no means to pretend that Christianity is linked to democracy and that Christian faith compels every believer to be a democrat; it is to affirm that democracy is linked to Christianity and that the democratic impulse has arisen in human history as the moral manifestation of the inspiration of the Gospel.29

Maritain was a direct influence on de Gasperi, although the French Thomist was in fact not necessarily in favour of founding explicitly Christian parties – rather, as he put it in a letter to de Gasperi, Christianity should be something like the ‘yeast’ of political life, making the liberation from pagan Fascism the first step to a new political culture based on moral and, to some degree, religious argument.30 And indeed, de Gasperi did not want to shape a party that understood itself as exclusively Catholic (or, even worse, was perceived as the political arm of the Vatican); rather, the DC, in de Gasperi’s mind, was to become a genuine partito nazionale – a national, cross-class ‘people’s party’ (much


like the CDU in Germany). Nevertheless, especially to highlight the contrast with Communism, DC leaders affirmed the idea that democracy necessarily had to rest on Christian foundations, argued that the only alternative to Christian Democracy was totalitarianism, and that only ‘applied Christianity’ could ensure Italy’s political and, even more importantly, moral renewal.

Maritain’s philosophy, alongside the ‘personalism’ of Emmanuel Mounier, also proved important for a group of more left-leaning Christian Democratic thinkers involved in the drafting of the Italian Constitution. At their centre were the intellectuals Giorgio La Pira (who was to become the mayor of Florence) and Giuseppe Dossetti from the Catholic University in Milan, who were often called professorini [young, or fledgling, professors]. They had avidly read Maritain and Mounier, criticized individualistic liberalism and saw the person as always embedded in community, or, as La Pira put it: ‘the human personal unfolds through organic belonging to the successive social communities in which it is contained and via which it steadily develops and perfects itself’.

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31 De Gasperi was by no means a philosopher, but some of his main ideological objectives are discussed in A. de Gasperi, Idee sulla Democrazia Cristiana, ed. N. Guiso (Rome, 1974).
33 Of course personalism was notoriously vague both as philosophy and as politics.
Dossetti, an expert in ecclesiastical law, had fought in the Resistance and served on the Committee of National Liberation. In 1945 he was made vice-secretary of the DC and tried to open up Christian Democracy to personalist, pacifist and even socialist ideas. He had been deeply impressed by the Labour Party’s 1945 election victory in Britain; he and his colleagues had studied Beveridge and Keynes (who they wrongly believed to have been a Labour politicians), and were hoping for an Italian version of a personalist, labour-based version of a democrazia sostanziale. The biweekly journal Cronache Sociali served as a platform to articulateDossetti’s and his followers’ ideals of an ‘integral democracy’ which realized Christian solidarity throughout the state, society and the economy.35 Their central beliefs about the economic reordering of post-war Italy could be summed up with their slogan ‘First the person and then the market’.36 What this meant in terms of political institutions and policies often remained unclear, however.37

Nevertheless, the professorini and the left of the DC managed to have at least their version of the first article of the Constitution passed: the personalist-sounding ‘Italy is a democratic Republic founded upon work’ prevailed over the ‘Italy is democratic republic of workers’ proposed by Palmiro Togliatti and a number of Socialists.38 Article 3 in turn stated, in very personalist language, that ‘it is the Republic’s duty to remove

36 Ibid., p. 107.
37 The DC early only shelved plans for a corporatist second chamber. See K. v. Beyme, Das politische System Italiens (Stuttgart, 1970), 25.
obstacles of an economic or social order physically constricting the freedom and equality of citizens and thus impeding the full development of the human person’.  

Christian Democracy soon came to be characterized by a range of factions or correnti which were led by very different political personalities with very different political ideas – the gruppo dossettiano being one of them. The Dossettians were opposed by de Gasperi who sought to make the DC into a broad, strictly anticommunist coalition. Eventually a left-leaning form of Catholicism that had emerged from the Resistance was decisively defeated politically, not just in Italy, but also in many other parts of Europe. The defeated also included even more ambitious visions than Dossetti’s -- in particular attempts to fuse Catholicism and Communism such as the Movimento di Cattolici Comunisti and the Partito Comunista Cristiano.

In general, under the influence of the liberal free-marker Luigi Einaudi – himself a member of the Liberal Party, not a Christian Democrat -- Democrazia Cristiana turned out to be much more pro-market in economics than one might have thought in the mid to late 1940s: ideas for profit sharing and land redistribution which had been put forward by de Gasperi and his collaborators were swiftly abandoned. At the same time, like the German Christian Democrats, the party was consistently conservative in questions of morality, especially as far as the role of women and the family was concerned. Already in 1946, at the first congress of the DC, Guido Gonella declared in a rousing speech that

an invisible and silent bomb has destroyed the family unit. The family, if it is not already dispersed, is more likely to unite around the radio, which is a deafening and dulling window on the world, than around the domestic hearth… The family is a fortress which cannot be defended from inside the fortress. Certainly we must also issue forth and fight the enemy in open battle.41

Luigi Sturzo had insisted in 1945 that in the past liberty had been ‘badly understood by clericals’, but now had to be ‘re-linked to the Christian tradition of popular sovereignty and to the democratic regime’ – but the LIBERTAS in the DC’s coat of arms appeared to signify mostly freedom from communism and freedom to plunder the state.42 Corruption and clientelism increased steadily, and the basic commitment to combine traditional Catholic morality with free-market economics (though tempered with a heavy dose of state interventionism and industrial policies) did not change even some of Dossetti’s followers, such as Aldo Moro and Amintore Fanfani, eventually gained the upper hand in the party. It is telling that the DC, in the many successive governments of which it formed part, always held on – of all ministries – to the post office, because it provided the ampiest opportunities for patronage; extensive use was also made of the Cassa per il Mezzogiorno which had been established in 1950 finally to address the ‘Southern Question’. Some drew the consequences early on: Dossetti, for instance, found that his

41 Quoted by P. Ginsborg, Contemporary Italy (London, 1990), pp. 76-7.
ideals of Christian solidarity had been abandoned; in 1951, *Cronache Sociali* stopped publication, Dossetti, always as much a religious mystic as a politician, dissolved his left-wing faction in the party, founded a monastic order called Piccola famiglia dell'Annunziata and eventually became a priest. And ironically, state intervention and nationalizations – two Dossettian ideas – only helped to extend the system of patronage further, as it created ever more positions for DC politicians and their clients.

Arguably, no ideological conflict in the DC after the early debates among Dossetti, de Gasperi and other politicians deeply influenced by personalism ever rose to a similar level of wider theoretical interest – although it is also important to remember that de Gasperi vanquished not just left-wing Catholic forces, but also those intellectuals and politicians, above all Luigi Gedda, who wanted to turn the DC a vehicle for authoritarian, integralist Catholicism (or, as one historian has put it, ‘Pacellian populism’). The point is this: a party permanently in power continued to need an enemy, communism, not least to keep the many correnti together; but it was not really in need of political ideas. Or, as Mario Caciagli has put it, referring to Christian Democracy in Europe in general: ‘the possession of political power deterred the Christian democratic parties from developing the ability to formulate an original political theory’. In the famous phrase of Giulio

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43 His ideals, however, lived on in the corrente of Iniziativa Democratica and then the corrente Base.


46 Caciagli, ‘Christian democracy’, p. 177.
Andreotti, Christian Democracy was condemned to govern; but it was also almost condemned not to theorize, in order to preserve its vaunted political pragmatism.

One area where public justification was needed, however, was the DC’s promotion of European integration – arguably one of Christian Democracy’s major achievements in twentieth-century Western Europe as a whole. Here also, however, academic political theory played a rather marginal role: de Gasperi was a pragmatist when it came to rehabilitating Italy’s international standing after Fascism and to increasing its political influence in Western Europe in particular. If anything, ‘European integration’ was supposed to have emotional, rather than normative-philosophical appeal. As De Gasperi put it in a speech to the Italian Senate:

…some said that the European federation is a myth. It’s true, it is a myth in the Sorelian sense. And if you want to there to be a myth, then please tell us what myth we need to give to our youth concerning relations between one state and another, the future of Europe, the future of the world, security, and peace, if not this effort toward unification? Do you prefer the myth of dictatorship, the myth of power, the myth of one’s nation’s flag, even if it is accompanied by heroism? But then, we would create once again that conflict that inevitably leads to war. I tell you that this myth is a myth of peace.47

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47 Quoted in Acanfora, ‘Myths’, p. 326.
In retrospect, Italian Christian Democracy appears very much as an ‘ideology of transition’ – it helped adapt Catholicism to the parameters of modern mass democracy and to implement a modern Stato assistenziale, but it served less and less as a distinct political Weltanschauung and in many ways blended into a conservative version of Social Democracy. Put differently, and more simply: Italy never had a Maritain. After the professorini there were a few more sophisticated intellectual debates, especially around the DC’s opening to the left, and proposals to reform the constitution and provide Italy with a new institutional architecture. But overall, it was mostly pragmatism, power politics, and, to the very end of the First Republic’s DC, plundering the state.

**Political Thought on the Left: Eurocommunism and the Politics of Autonomy**

The Italian post-war Left, to say the very least, was a highly complex phenomenon – much more so than, for example, the German or the British Left. While much could be said about the Socialists and Radicals as well, the outstanding peculiarities of the Italian Left were, on the one hand, a Communist Party that tried very hard to become part of the national political establishment, and, on the other hand, a largely antiparliamentary movement of groups which effectively challenged the state over more than a decade. These two peculiarities were arguably related: radical hopes were kept alive or newly

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49 I leave aside here some of the thinkers who continued in a more Catholic-integralist vein – the important work of Augusto Del Noce in particular.
fired up, precisely because the PCI – despite its leading role in the Resistance and its resulting moral capital -- neither made good on its revolutionary promise nor ever really became integrated into the system as it had evolved under DC leadership. Especially the apparent hypocrisy of the Communists in the face of undeniable working class power drove left-wing theorists and activists.

Palmiro Togliatti had been a hard-line Stalinist for most of the interwar period and during the Second World War. However, as is well known, in 1944 he did not judge the situation ripe for full-fledged revolution and argued that in the absence of a Red Army Italian Communists would have to work through legal means. Thus, after the so-called svolta di Salerno, when he recognized the Badoglio government, he made the Communist Party participate in the first post-war governments of national unity, holding back on proposing radical economic measures and anticlerical provocations. He served as Justice Minister under De Gasperi (and, in that capacity ending the purges or epurazione with an amnesty) and also played an important role in writing the Republic’s constitution (for which he favoured the inclusion of the Lateran Pacts, in contrast to every other party on the left). Togliatti wanted the PCI to be a ‘party of a new type’ and envisaged what was usually referred to as ‘progressive democracy’ (which was essentially modeled on the Popular Font of the 1930s). Moreover, already in the immediate post-war period Togliatti spoke of a via nazionale for Communism, or a terza via between the superpowers – a position that would eventually lead to his advocacy of ‘polycentrism’ in international Communism.

Togliatti’s post-war strategy was only very partially successful: he made the Communists into the largest party of the Left, but his idea of incorporating the PCI into
national political and cultural life and permanently serving as a privileged partner for the
DC clearly failed – despite the fact that he had made concession after concession to De
Gasperi.\textsuperscript{50} The PCI was expelled from the DC-led government in 1947; subsequently,
Togliatti and other PCI leaders essentially concentrated on local and, above all, on
cultural politics, creating a ‘red counterculture’ in opposition to the ‘white’ culture of the
DC. There was only limited room for intellectual manoeuvre within this red
counterculture, however: Elio Vittorini’s exciting \textit{Il Politecnico}, which had sought to link
the PCI with the avant-garde, was closed down after a few issues; relations with the
neorealist filmmakers soured; and the late 1940s saw the imposition of Stalinist dogmas
in culture, and even the imperative to accept and promote Lysenko.

Antonio Gramsci’s \textit{Prison Notebooks} began to be published in 1947, though
selectively in such a way as to leave out Gramsci’s criticisms of Stalin and his own party.
The discovery of Gramsci as a major theoretician of Marxism was a spurt for Italian
communism in general, and the Sardinian was extensively promoted as ‘our great one’ by
Togliatti and as ‘the most genial and prepared Marxist that Italy has ever had’ by the
literary critic Carlo Salinari.\textsuperscript{51} At the same time, Gramsci’s thought was systematically
distorted to fit the post-war political strategy of the PCI: he became almost exclusively
the thinker of patiently building cultural hegemony through peaceful persuasion; he thus
was effectively made into a theorist of gradualism and ‘structural reform’, rather than

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\textsuperscript{50} A. de Grand, \textit{The Italian Left in the Twentieth Century: A History of the Socialist and Communist Parties}
\textsuperscript{51} R. Drake, \textit{Apostles and Agitators: Italy’s Marxist Revolutionary Tradition} (Cambridge., Mass., 2003),
pp. 206-207.
\end{flushleft}
revolution in any real sense of rupture. 52  ‘War of position’ was stressed almost exclusively at the expense of ‘war of maneuver’; the focus remained firmly on transforming civil society, rather than conquering the state apparatus. Thus politics became ‘culturalized’ – but culture also became politicized. As Bobbio put it in retrospect: ‘The maxim that Croce took as his inspiration in the early years of the century – that the only way for an intellectual to be involved in politics was to become involved in culture – was turned around to state that the only way to contribute to culture was to be active in politics and do one’s bit toward the transformation of society’. 53

Yet, under Togliatti the party did not abandon Leninist language and the tradition of insurrectionism. In fact, it engaged in what would often be referred to as a policy of doppiezza (duplicity), talking the revolutionary talk, but in practice playing by the rules of parliamentarism and even capitalism. 54 Formulas such as ‘a party of government and a party of struggle’ tried to conceptualize this studied ambiguity between being anti-system and being a ‘loyal opposition’. 55 An intra-party left-wing led by Pietro Ingrao kept criticizing the apparent abandonment of anticapitalism – but doppiezza only turned into an acute problem when the PCI was finally confronted with mass worker militancy

53 Bobbio, Ideological Profile, p. 166.
54 There was, however, also extensive planning for the case that the party were to be outlawed; moreover, the PCI received significant secret subsidies from the radical hopes were kept alive or newly fired up by the Soviet Union annually. R. Service, Comrades! A History of World Communism (New York, 2007), pp. 265-266.
towards the late 1960s, and in particular the ‘hot autumn’ of 1969. The PCI had kept some distance from the student movement which had been active since the mid-1960s (and significantly preceded the French student movement and the Parisian May ’68); but it obviously could not simply dismiss or even try to reign in the political energies displayed by workers bypassing the established trade-union leaderships and, in particular, spontaneously organizing themselves on the shop floor in factory councils and electing their own delegati. Italian workers – another peculiarity of the hot autumn and its aftermath – also set wage equality across skill levels as one of their major goals.

The party’s relatively cautious stance provoked heavy criticism from the left of the PCI and eventually led to the expulsion, in 1969, of the major radical Marxist theorists, the Il Manifesto group. Named after a monthly of internal dissent, founded in 1969, it included Lucio Magri, Rossana Rossanda, Luigi Pintor and Aldo Natoli, among others. Inspired not least by the example of the Chinese Revolution, these radicals were to criticize the apparently over-cautious stance of the PCI in 1945 and its disingenuous combination of ‘reformist pseudo-Leninism’ and ‘ecumenical pseudo-Gramscianism’ (Martin Jay); and rather than celebrating the heroic Resistance of the Republic, they began to speak about a missed opportunity for revolution – the rivoluzione mancata. This went so far that some sessantottini and eventually the Red Brigades were


58 Jay, Marxism, p. 427.
to call themselves resistenti ad oltranza, or permanent partisans. Giangiacomo’s Feltrinelli’s Grupi di azione proletaria, or GAP, also alluded to a Resistance group with the same initials, and explicitly claimed to be engaged in a fight to prevent the country from reverting to Fascism.

Already in the years since 1956 -- the date of Khrushchev’s secret speech and the Hungarian Uprising which had cost the Communist Party thousands of members -- space had opened up beyond the PCI for a kind of theorizing which was simultaneously less oriented towards the Soviet Union and the whole ideal of fare come in Russia (instead it looked to Mao’s China) and more determined to bring about radical change in Italy itself. Raniero Panzieri had written in the Socialist Party’s Mondo Operaio in the 1950s specifically against the studied ambiguities of togliattismo and affirmed his own unwavering belief in revolution – and, in particular, in the necessity to return class struggle to the factories, rather than hope for change through an alliance of the working class with progressive members of the bourgeoisie. Panzieri was interested in the theories of the Frankfurt School, but politically he sought above all to re-unify the Italian Left – through stressing a return to the idea of factory councils and the importance of affirming the ‘revolutionary autonomy’ of the workers’ movement. When the Socialists joined the Christian Democrats in government, Panzieri resigned; in 1961 he founded the journal Quaderni rossi (later complemented by Mario Tronti’s more radical breakaway publication Classe Operaia, a major journal of the New left alongside the Quaderni.

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Piacentini). Panzieri wanted to provide a platform for theoretical reflections around ‘workerism’ (operaismo) – a particular focus on actual class struggles in factories, as opposed to political parties’ maneuverings within the established institutions of the Republic and the corporatist ‘politics of productivity’ which had been accepted by virtually all European left-wing parties in the post-war period.\(^6\) Theorists of workerism conceived the working class as the driving force of capitalism and viewed the conflicts over wages and working conditions as intensely political; they built on empirical research conducted in the 1950s in the FIAT and Olivetti factories to demonstrate that the production process itself could be a primary form of domination. A new enthusiasm for sociology and empirical studies of industrial relations in particular were to inform the founding texts of the Italian nuova sinistra (a development paralleled in Germany and France); they reinforced the thought that it was plainly not enough to seize the means of production -- the conditions of production themselves had to change and were a better starting point for revolutionary transformations than the statist ‘neoreformism’ of Togliatti’s PCI. Not surprisingly, Panzieri and his followers were attacked by PCI representatives for ‘infantile leftism’ and ‘spontaneism’.\(^6\) And yet Panzieri was far from ‘spontaneous’: revolutionary activity, he held, had to be preceded by precise empirical analysis, theory-building and careful ideological schooling of a working class which – here the influence of the Frankfurt School was manifest – had apparently lost all real class consciousness.


\(^6^2\) Drake, The Revolutionary Mystique, p. 46.
Two of Panzieri’s disciples disagreed: workerist analysis was to be radicalized and broadened by Mario Tronti and Antonio Negri; they were to be at the heart of the group Potere Operaio, founded in 1969. Both had been deeply impressed by the FIAT worker riots in Piazza Statuto in Turin in 1962; unlike Panzieri, they had seen it as evidence that revolutionary worker autonomy could in fact smash capitalism immediately, without going through supposed stages prescribed by orthodox Marxism. Tronti argued that the focus should be shifted from factories in a narrow industrial sense to the notion of the ‘social factory’, that is, processes of domination in society as a whole; Negri, on the other hand, claimed that the idea of the ‘mass worker’, i.e. the unskilled, particularly dominated worker who had been at the center of attention for operaismo initially, should be replaced with that of the ‘socialized worker’ – like Troni, he thought that factory discipline and domination had spread through society as a whole ‘like a virus’. Negri also pointed to a whole range of groups outside the working class as traditionally defined: ‘precarious workers’, students, the women’s movement, and basically anyone connected with the family and education. Such a theoretical shift obviously helped with a redefinition of the revolutionary subject during the 1970s: further and further away from workers and towards individuals and groups generally willing to assert their autonomy (or deemed to be in need of asserting their autonomy). Moreover, Negri – whom Bobbio called ‘the best versed in theory and the most radical in practice’ among the New Left thinkers63 -- increasingly emphasized the importance of ‘constituent power’ – the people at large -- which was sharply distinguished from constituted power in the sense of state institutions traditionally understood.

63 Bobbio, Ideological Profile, pp. 190-191.
Thus operaismo came to be replaced with autonomia; what remained the same was a rejection of any Leninist conception of a vanguard party as indispensable for revolution. At least in theory, formal party structure was de-emphasized in favour of local committees and networks (comitati di base), and direct actions by workers and other potentially revolutionary subjects – refusal to work, autoriduzione (the refusal to pay transport fares or rent), immediate appropriation of wealth and ‘worker self-valorization’.

In a somewhat similar vein, groups such as Lotta Continua and its theorists were shifting attention from the idea of workers forming some kind of ‘organic unity’ with students to a renewed search for a revolutionary subject beyond supposedly privileged workers: women, the unemployed and a range of marginalized groups were identified as a possible ‘real proletariat’. Even more importantly, the apparently ever-increasing polarization of Italian society led a number of theorists to claim that a real revolution had actually become possible in the 1970s, and that a final clash between the forces of reaction and ‘the real proletariat’ might be imminent and could lead to genuine liberation.

It is here that the thought of Carl Schmitt first became relevant for the Italian Left -- with Schmitt understood as the theorist of life-and-death political conflict and, in a sense, as an antidote to an entirely ‘culturalized’ Gramsci. One might say it was old-fashioned political catastrophism instead of slow cultural change.

At a seminar on the relationship between politics and economics, organized by Norberto Bobbio at the University of Turin in early December 1972, Tronti first

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64 For the Italian reception of Schmitt – and the Marxisti Schmittiani in particular – see I. Staff, 
presented a paper about the ‘autonomy of the political’.65 There he abandoned the older workerist idea of a revolutionary break on the level of the economy and in the factories in particular. The socio-economic situation, nationally and internationally, was simply too ‘complex’ for that. Instead, one had directly to combat the irrationality of the political action undertaken by the capitalists. Rather than creating a dual power on the level of the factory, dualismo di potere had to be instituted directly at the highest political level – the state.66 This meant that workers should refuse altogether to be integrated into the capitalist sham democracy.

This new emphasis on the primacy of the political and a struggle at state level was the precondition for a reception of Schmitt’s thought among what came to be known as the Marxisti Schmittiani – a derogatory label initially applied by liberals to Tronti and his followers. These thinkers did not deny Schmitt’s right-wing politics, but Tronti insisted that the person Schmitt and his intentions could be irrelevant – what mattered was his acute criticism of liberalism, parliamentarism and the democrazia discutidora.67 Moreover, what mattered was that his friend-enemy distinction could be mapped onto a new understanding of class antagonism. In fact, Schmitt’s thinking should be radicalized even further by making the capitalists not just the real, but the absolute enemy.68 To that

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66 Staff, Staatsdenken, 197.
67 In his obituary of Schmitt in the Italian Communist newspaper Tronti essentially argued that he wanted to be for Schmitt what Marx had been for Hegel. See his ‘Dentro il Leviatano’, in: L’Unità, 24th April 1985.
68 Staff, Staatsdenken, p. 200.
end, any existing political and economic crisis also had to be radicalized in the direction of a real state of exception. In other words, what Schmitt had criticized in Lenin and other Marxist thinkers—in particular, the conception of absolute enmity—was now enthusiastically taken up by theorists like Tronti. Thus Schmittian elements became part of a thoroughgoing ‘Marxist critique of Marxism’ which sought to take leave of economic and historical categories which had been central to post-war Italian left-wing thought, instead putting a practical theory of power squarely at the centre of revolutionary theorizing.

Not surprisingly, all of the proponents of operaismo, autonomia and Marist Schmittianism regarded the PCI with immense distrust. And, one might say such distrust was justified at least in the sense that since the early 1970s the PCI had been moving further to the right, deciding in 1973 on the famous ‘historic compromise’ with the DC. PCI leader Enrico Berlinguer had begun to advocate cooperation with the Christian Democrats against the background of the overthrow of Salvador Allende in Chile; eventually the PCI played a crucial role in keeping the DC in power (without officially joining a coalition), all in the name of ‘national solidarity’ in the face of economic crises and domestic terrorism towards the late 1970s; in fact, Berlinguer became a major advocate of economic austerità. The PCI, having criticized the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 (not without some delays and hesitations which cost the Party further members), completed its strappo (separation) from Moscow and officially endorsed pluralism and economic reformism, abandoning even the Popular Front-inspired talk of ‘progressive democracy’ in the process. As is well known, this strategy in the end came to nothing: the Communists never directly participated in government, never

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regained the intellectual initiative from the New Left, and lost most of the major policy debates in the 1980s (on the scala mobile in particular). In retrospect there seemed little doubt that the Christian Democrats had made the history, and the Communists had made the compromise.70

Arguably, a major reaction to the large-scale failure of contestazione and ‘mass militancy’ was the emergence during the 1980s of weak thought’ or pensiero debole. It was based largely on a particular reading of Nietzsche and Heidegger by Gianni Vattimo, who had studied with Luigi Pareyson in Turin and then Hans-Georg Gadamer and Karl Löwith in Heidelberg in the 1950s; eventually he became professor of hermeneutics in Turin (and, for a time, a Member of the European Parliament as well as a major advocate of gay rights in Italy).71 The questioning of strong metaphysical and ontological foundations, doubts about unitary subject and master narratives – all these formed part of a thinking style that appeared uniquely appropriate to the age. As Vattimo put it at one point:

…hermeneutics is not a philosophy but the enunciation of historical existence itself in the age of the end of metaphysics. The ‘validity’ of Heidegger’s thought is equivalent to its capacity, superior to that of other philosophies, to correspond to the epoch, to let the event speak: the same event that Nietzsche calls nihilism and that for Heidegger is the end of metaphysics. This event comprises the end of Eurocentrism, the critique

70 Abse, ‘Italy’, p. 205.
71 See in particular the collection Il pensiero debole, eds. P. A. Rovatti and G. Viattimo (Milan, 1983)
of ideology, the dissolution of the evidentness of consciousness through psychoanalysis, the explicit pluralization of the agencies of information, the mass media, which, as Heidegger anticipated in his essay ‘The Age of the World-Picture’ (‘Die Zeit des Weltbildes’), make the idea of a ‘unique’ world picture impossible.\(^7\)

According to Vattimo, ‘weak thought’ – understood as an ontology of weakness, not as weak thinking -- could form the basis of political goals such as reducing violence and furthering social justice.\(^7\) He also argued that hermeneutics constituted in fact the ‘development and maturation of the Christian message’, and that ‘postmodern nihilism’ – not a negative term, in Vattimo’s view, but a proper letting-go of metaphysics and strong ontology -- was in fact Christianity’s proper essence. The connection between these claims was the idea that Christianity dissolved ‘objective truths’ and left only varying interpretations – and that only such a ‘non-objective-metaphysical’ conception of truth was appropriate for democracy, since everything else would turn into authoritarianism. Thus Vattimo could present himself as a proponent of ‘optimistic nihilism’ – a nihilism supposedly strengthening democracy and a non-violent politics.

In a rather reductionist manner some critics viewed ‘weak thought’ as simply a kind of philosophical opportunism; Adelino Zanini, for instance, claimed that


it expressed above all a singular situation: perhaps no other European society in recent history has been so conflictual as Italian society in the 1970s, and no other society has given expression to such a radical theory of social change, centered on the demand for communism as a minimum objective. In the same way, precisely in Italy the ‘weakness’ of thought has gone beyond the condition, even the tragic condition, of the defeat of social struggles. The condition has become an ideology, and in response to the effective and total transparency of domination in society there is only the sentiment of disenchantment. They say, then, *amor fati* – that is, what appears no longer has anything ‘proper’ to it, or rather, everything ‘proper’, while it inheres to a subject, represents in a reactive way every ‘presence’. Better and more clearly, we may say that this is a way of ‘adjusting to the times’.74

There is indeed little doubt that the radical scaling back of hopes to realize emancipatory goals through mass political action, the recourse to a non-authoritarian form of religion – perhaps as a form of consolation – and the emphasis on ‘weakness’ could be read as a sign of retreat from everything that *contestazione* had promised – and not fulfilled. Making philosophy merely ‘edifying’, renouncing political ‘onto-theology’ and putting conversation – not political conflict – first seemed the very opposite of radical Italian political thought in the 1970s, even if in fact the avowed anti-authoritarianism of

74 A. Zanini, ‘Weak Thought between Being and Difference’, in: *Radical Thought in Italy*, p. 54.
Vattimo’s philosophy might well be seen as continuous with intellectual trends of the 1960s and 1970s.

Yet Vattimo’s thought clearly transcends its local Italian or even European context: the attempt at turning Heidegger into a ‘philosopher of democracy’ and at a reconciliation of secularized religion and democracy in particular are not simply ingenuous ways of compensating for political defeats. They are efforts at de-escalating political-philosophical conflicts about ‘truth’ – while holding practical political aspirations of a broadly social democratic kind constant. But then again, one might precisely ask whether the high philosophical language of Vattimo ultimately amounted politically to more than a restatement of respectful or at least tolerant pluralism – for that is what ‘nihilism’ or, in Richard Rorty’s words, ‘common-sense Heideggerianism’ ultimately seemed to mean.75

Lone Liberal? Bobbio between Realism and Idealism

Norberto Bobbio is probably Italy’s pre-eminent post-war political thinker. This claim is based as much on the particular political sensibility Bobbio stood for as any clearly identifiable body of political theory. Most observers agree that Bobbio’s arguments about democracy in an ingenuous manner brought together the two seemingly contradictory influences on his thought – cold-eyed realism in the tradition of Machiavelli, Pareto and

Mosca on the one hand and abstract normativist jurisprudence, particularly that of Kelsen, on the other; but most also concede that his theories do not necessarily have a great claim to originality. Nevertheless, Bobbio embodied a ‘Cold War liberalism’ that did not turn dogmatic and therefore illiberal; and he advocated – and lived -- what Nadia Urbinati has called an ‘ethos of dialogue’ that was to be a profound inspiration for several generations of Italian political theorists. He was also one of the leading members of the Resistance generation who reminded their contemporaries of the ‘official morality’ of the years 1943-1948, some of which was encapsulated in the constitution that was never fully realized; one might even say, with Paul Ginsborg, that thinkers like Bobbio served as a kind of democratic conscience of the Republic.76

Bobbio was born into a bourgeois liberal family in Turin in 1909 – a time when FIAT would produce around 1800 cars per year.77 He studied law and phenomenology, which led to a brief trip to Germany in the 1930s. He was a member of the Fascist University Groups, but in the 1930s moved closer to Giustizia e Libertà (Justice and Liberty), the clandestine liberal-socialist group founded by Carlo Rosselli (Bobbio was briefly arrested by the fascist police in 1935).78 His liberalism had always been of the ‘Northern’ type, preoccupied with the problems of a modern industrial society. He was strongly attracted to the English contractarian tradition of Hobbes and Locke, and, like Rossellii, he viewed liberalism as, above all, an ‘ethical conception’ -- not as in some sense a justification of the free-market (Italian is fortunate in having the distinction

77 Bobbio, A Political Life, p. 12.
78 For Rosselli’s political thought see his Liberal Socialism, ed. N. Urbinati (Princeton, 1994)
between liberalismo and liberismo). In short, his liberalism – if that is the right word at all for a man who called himself a socialist most of the time and was closer to the Socialist Party later in life -- was distant from the idealist-Hegelian variety associated with Croce; it aimed at an anti-statist synthesis of liberalism with socialism, though not necessarily in the form of a ‘philosophical formula’. As he put it in his autobiography: ‘I always interpreted liberal-socialism not as a philosophical formula, but as a programme of political compromise which could be only brought into effect … through the recognition that the social rights demanded by the socialist tradition were a pre-condition for the full implementation of the libertarian rights demanded by the liberal tradition’.81

Bobbio eventually joined the Partito d’Azione (Action Party), which played an important role in the Resistance, but was crushed at the first post-war polls. Very much a ‘party of the intellectuals’ or, as Togliatti put it, a group of ‘generals without an army’, the Action Party had embodied precisely the hope for a synthesis of liberalism and socialism under the principle of ‘equal liberty’ – though in endless debates it had also very much split along liberals versus socialists lines. After the apparent defeat of liberal socialism as a party-political ideology, Bobbio retreated for a while into the teaching of the particular Italian tradition of dottrina dello stato (which finds somewhat of


80 Bellamy, Modern Italian Social Theory, pp. 141-142.

81 Bobbio, A Political Life, p. 41.

82 N. Urbinati, ‘The Importance of Norberto Bobbio’, in: Dissent (Spring 2004), p. 79. As Bobbio observed in his memoirs: ‘Curiously, liberal-socialism, which was a philosophical construct, was embodied in what was supposed to be a party of “action”.’ See Bobbio, A Political Life, p. 41.
a parallel in German Staatsrechtslehre). He studied the English constitution with particular attention and was one of the first Italian intellectuals to draw attention to Karl Popper’s liberal political thought.\textsuperscript{83} Especially under the influence of Kelsen, whose work he had first read in the early 1930s, Bobbio developed a minimal, procedural theory of democracy understood as the rules which allow the peaceful co-existence of individuals in society – and that, in particular, protect minorities from majorities. This minimal definition of democracy was not without normative substance, however – the point was precisely that the very rules of the political game contained values. Moreover, according to Bobbio, proper democracy presumed proper liberalism – that is, the entrenchment of rights and the rule of law more broadly. As he put it:

We can define democracy as that regime that permits the taking of decisions with the maximum consensus of citizens, founded on the principles of liberty, so that the citizens can elect their governors and, at the same time, the principle of the rule of law obliges the governors not to go beyond their power and to exercise it within the sphere of a system of written norms.\textsuperscript{84}

\textsuperscript{83} An even more pronounced embrace of il liberalismo di matrice anglosassone, especially of the American experience, can be found in the work of Nicola Matteucci, one of the founders of Il Mulino. See in particular his 1972 Il liberalismo in un mondo in trasformazione.

This turn to Kelsen – starting what Bobbio himself later called a strain of ‘Kelsenitis’ in Italy – clearly was a reaction against speculative philosophy, as was Bobbio’s endorsement, broadly speaking, of empiricism. To put it crudely: Bobbio reoriented at least parts of Italian political thought from Hegel to Hobbes (the thinker Bobbio admired most); moreover, his stress on the importance of the formal aspects of democracy was also a critique of the political system that was emerging in post-war Italy, with a weak state, strong mass parties and consequently little respect for the ‘rules of the game’ or, at the least, a tendency to twist them to serve one’s own political purposes.

In the mid-1950s Bobbio engaged in an important debate with one of the foremost proponents of ‘scientific Marxism’, Galvano Della Volpe (who was to be an important influence on Panzieri). At the time Della Volpe was presenting a clear-cut alternative to the ‘culturalized Gramscism’ being promoted by the PCI and the general ‘structural reform’-line pursued by the Communists. Della Volpe rejected a humanist or a historicist Marxism in favour of grounding a strictly materialist Marxism in science and logic. Politically, he contrasted mere bourgeois individualist liberty under capitalist liberal democracy with proper social and ‘meritocratic’ liberty achieved under proper Communism, when clashes of selfish individual interests and the division of labour would have disappeared – and therefore also made individual rights superfluous. In

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87 G. Della Volpe, ‘Communismo e democrazia moderna’
fact, Della Volpe went to great lengths to praise the socialist legality that had supposedly been achieved in the Soviet Union.

Bobbio criticized Della Volpe’s conflation of economic and civil rights, and claimed that the abolition of private property did not equate to the end of conflicts about the good life for individuals with diverse personal interests and talents. Thus he stressed the value of liberal democracy as the unique means of allowing for civilized forms of conflict, as well as the essentially perennial importance of protecting minorities and individuals. Thus Bobbio also broke with the widespread notion that institutional challenges would be solved more or less automatically if only the individual’s or the collective’s consciousness changed: the necessity of people’s integration into the state no longer trumped the concern with the particular shape political institutions should actually take.\footnote{Bellamy, \textit{Modern Italian Social Theory}, p. 151.} Rather than holding out the hope of transcending conflict for good, Bobbio insisted that one must never go back on the achievements of liberal democracy, and that a socialism promising to leave them by the wayside necessarily had to turn into an illiberal regression. He also emphasized that negative and positive liberty should not be played off against each other; rather, the two types of liberty depended on each other. Finally, Bobbio drew a distinction between the sources of authority and the means by which authority was exercised – countering the Marxist claim that a proper foundation of authority in the proletariat was all that mattered (which then naturally led to a defence of the idea of the dictatorship of the proletariat). Thus Bobbio challenged Marxist theorists on a number on several levels; in particular, he took them to task for their lack of real
normative theories, and their inability to put forward a Marxist theory of the state. But he also challenged the PCI as a whole to resolve its studied ambiguity about ‘progressive democracy’ and the need to preserve ‘bourgeois freedoms’ and ‘bourgeois representative democracy’ under socialism.

Bobbio called himself ‘chronically disenchanted’ or even disenchanted ‘by temperament or by calling’. He sought to face up to what he termed the ‘unfulfilled’ or ‘broken’ promises of democracy, while at the same time stressing the value of ‘merely formal democracy’ – a democracy on which no legitimate political programme for the future could go back. He called many of his writings ‘popular philosophy’ which intended ‘to bring democracy down to earth, from the realm of ethereal principles to where there are flesh-and-blood interests in conflict’. And he continued:

I have always considered this to be the only way to come to terms with the contradictions which assail a democratic society and with the tortuous route it must follow to resolve rather than succumb to them. In this way it is possible to acknowledge democracy’s endemic vices without losing heart and without giving up any faint hope of improving it.

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89 See also in particular his *Which Socialism? Marxism, Socialism and Democracy*, trans. R. Griffin, ed. R. Bellamy (Cambridge, 1987), which includes a response by Negri. Negri always maintained that there is a Marxist theory of the state – but it cannot be found through exegesis of Marx’s writings; rather, it had to be constructed for the present in Marx’s spirit.


Moreover, a self-described perenne dubitante (perennial doubter), was genuinely liberal in wanting constantly to engage his ideological enemies. As he put it:

It might be logically consistent to answer intolerance with intolerance, but it is ethically poor and perhaps politically disadvantageous. One can never be sure that the person who is intolerant will understand the ethical value of respecting others’ views once they are accepted within the liberal camp. It is, however, certain that a persecuted and excluded intolerant will never become a liberal. It is worth risking liberty by making its enemy its beneficiary if the only alternative is to limit liberty to the point of suffocating it or not allowing it to bear fruit. Much better an always endangered but expansive liberty than a liberty well protected but unable to develop.92

In short, Bobbio stood for a politics of dialogue and a ‘maieutic practice that invited others – academics, intellectuals and politicians -- to dialogue, to doubt and to self-questioning.93 He was both the advocate and the embodiment precisely of a democrazia discutidora and the – as he put it – apolitical virtue of ‘meekness’, which in principle allowed others to be themselves.94 This kind of ‘politics of culture’ – an effort to move

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92 Quoted by Urbinati, ‘Liberalism in the Cold War’, p. 586.
94 Bobbio, In Praise of Meekness.
Italian political culture in a more liberal, reasonable and in a sense secular direction – was arguably Bobbio’s greatest contribution. He is comparable in this regard to Isaiah Berlin and Raymond Aron – sharp, but always respectful and even sympathetic critics of Marxism, who stood for an embattled liberal sensibility, rather than one master idea or systematic theory.\(^9\) He went much further though than they did in a socialist direction – and even described his enterprise as trying to affect a revolution in politics without revolutionary means.\(^6\)

It would be difficult to argue, however, that such a transformation has come about. After 1989 and the split of the PCI into the PDS and the Rifondazione Comunista, previous trends in Italian political thought essentially continued.\(^7\) The Marxism of the revolutionary social movements was adapted to post-Fordist conditions of production; and practical hope was added through a shot of what can only be called vitalism. This was particularly the case with Negri’s theories; Negri kept faith in a constituent power abolishing all traditional state structures and insisted that ‘only life in a constant process of renewal can form a constitution’.\(^8\) Apart from celebrating the ‘creative, Dyonisian powers of the netherworld’, he also – a genuine theoretical innovation – brought \textit{operaismo} together with post-structuralism and the political thought of Michel Foucault,

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\(^6\) Urbinati, ‘Liberalism in the Cold War’, p. 584.


all of which eventually resulted in the publication of the global (and pro-globalization) bestseller *Empire.*

At the same time, the realists upped the ante by drawing on the thought of Niklas Luhmann – references to social complexity and other elements in Luhmann’s systems theory were now widely used to dash democratic hopes for wider political participation (although, to be fair, it is important to recognize that Luhmann was also an important influence on the Left). In that sense, one kind of Italian exceptionalism in European political thought arguably continued after the apparent end of the major ideological battles of the twentieth century. However, on a more directly political plane, self-styled liberals – often market liberals rather than civil libertarians – sought precisely to settle the scores of twentieth-century ideological conflict. In particular, many liberali-liberisti sought to portray the First Republic as having been fatally damaged from the start by a communist or crypto-communist left-wing hegemony. They attacked the Resistance as the founding myth of the Republic, and they did not spare the iconic advocate of dialogue – Norberto Bobbio. Whether any of this had long-term influence on Italian political thought or culture is debatable – but it pales in significance compared to other factors influencing Italian politics, in particular the rise (and quasi-monopolization) of private television, and the concomitant phenomenon: the media intellectual.


Conclusion

It is always hazardous to generalize about ‘national traditions of political thought’. Such exercises can easily sound reductionist and turn into more or less sophisticated forms of evoking ‘national character’ as an explanation of why political thinkers thought what they thought. Of course, it would be peculiar to claim that political thought is entirely disconnected from political culture – after all, political thought is animated by the desire normatively to address, and redress, the problems thrown up in a particular set of political conversations and conflicts, and always informed, if not determined by particular styles of claim-making. Moreover, political thought – as I have tried to show by example in this essay – is not confined to ‘high political philosophy’, but is produced by and in turn focuses on political institutions – not least political parties.

With these caveats in place, one might say that on the one hand Italian political thought is particularly rich – a microcosm of ideological conflict in twentieth-century Europe as a whole. Two of the past hundred years’ major ideological innovations – fascism and Christian Democracy – emerged at least partially from a particular Italian context; though far less important for political developments in general, the same might be said about Eurocommunism.

On the other hand, Italy presents a case of perpetually frustrated normative hopes (of the Risorgimento, of the Resistance, of the revolutionary movements of the 1960s and 1970s – this list is far from complete); Bobbio called Italy a tragic country, and one might add that its political and civic culture seems simultaneously behind that of comparable countries and yet strangely ahead, too – again, one might point to mass militancy and
‘mass intellectuality’. In particular, a deficit of civic virtue appears to co-exist with a high degree of politicization.

Political thought has reflected some of these peculiarities – without, if I may repeat myself once more, therefore being reducible to historical circumstances. Of particular importance here is the oscillation between cold-eyed realism and idealism – an oscillation that is also reflected in the importation of political and legal thinkers from other traditions. One might think for instance of the wide-ranging Italian reception of, one other one hand, Schmitt as a representative of a politica pura e fredda and Luhmann as an example of l’impolitico, and, on the other hand, Kelsen as exemplar of an abstract normativism.

Equally important is the continuing set of conversations about the relationship between ‘formal democracy’ and an actually democratic political culture. It would be wrong to see this question as somehow the perennial Italian challenge since unification – the terms of the debate have changed significantly, and the significance of a thinker like Bobbio is not least to have shifted the debate beyond a simple-minded hope for a transformation of political consciousness being a panacea for a dysfunctional form of politics (his penchant for promoting a ‘politics of culture’ – described above – not withstanding). And yet even Bobbio in the end appears to have taught more by sensibility (or personality), or, one might simply say, personal example, rather than through political or legal analysis. Without a minimum of civic virtue, even he affirmed at the end, the minimal ‘rules of the game’ might not be effective. And indeed,

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101 Bellamy, Modern Italian Social Theory.
developments in present-day Italian politics suggest that neither legacies of liberalism nor a Bobbian democratic minimum can be taken for granted.

Finally, one might agree with Bobbio that high political philosophy had little impact in shaping Italian political culture; but at the same time it is hard to deny Gramsci’s insight that political thinkers close to parties (including extraparliamentary groups) were important in fashioning parties as ‘experimenters’ in concepts and ideas. And the latest of these experiments -- the Lega Nord\textsuperscript{102} and Forza Italia, and the transformation of the fascist MSI into the Alleanza Nazionale -- might well have significance beyond Italy’s borders, and foreshadow a quite different – and undesirable -- form of democracy in Europe.

\textsuperscript{102} For reasons of space I have had to omit here a discussion of the one of the most interesting right-wing thinkers – one-time Lega Nord chief ideologue Gianfranco Miglio. I provide a brief analysis of his thought in the chapter on the New European Right in A Dangerous Mind.