

THE LEFT AND THE DECOMPOSITION OF THE PARTY SYSTEM IN ITALY

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Due to its domination by the largest and most interesting Communist Party in the West, the Italian left always moved according to its own rhythms, though it was never immune from the problems that afflicted the workers' movement and progressive forces everywhere. The PCI's distinctiveness earned it considerable attention, and no small amount of admiration, at times because it was successful and innovative (think of the heyday of Eurocommunism in the mid to late 1970s), and at other times simply because it *was*. The existence of a large, flexible, and open organization like the PCI—with the added bonus of Antonio Gramsci as a former leader—served as an inspiration to militants and intellectuals across Europe in their struggles against the obtuseness and lack of imagination of their own leaders, whether of the social democratic or the Brezhnevite variety.

Distinctive to the end, the PCI formally dissolved itself in 1991 while it still controlled more than a quarter of the seats in the Italian parliament. Other CPs, like the French, might cling to a practice and an identity that had failed to keep up with changing times, rendering such parties marginalized onlookers even before the dissolution of the USSR. The PCI's new leader, Achille Occhetto, surrounded himself with renovators and tried radical therapy in an effort to reverse the decline that had afflicted the party for over a decade. Convinced that this decline would continue if the party simply reacted to events, Occhetto felt that a break with the past was needed to lay the groundwork for a recomposition of the entire left. And only such a total reshuffling of the political cards, he believed, would create the conditions for a new, progressive aggregation of forces able to force the Socialists out of their collaboration with the Christian Democrats and finally drive the DC from power.

Occhetto understood a key aspect of the dynamics of the Italian political system, but could not control the course of events even within his own party, let alone within Italy as a whole. As a result, the new Democratic Party of the Left (PDS) was born weak and divided, leaving the left more feeble and fragmented than ever. And while Occhetto correctly foresaw that the PCI's disappearance would break down old alignments, things did

not go as planned as other factors intervened to push the party system in unexpected directions. Despite its fluidity, there is much in the present situation that should give any progressive person pause: forces that are at best ambiguous are on the rise, and questions that are at best secondary are dominating political discourse. At the same time, precisely because it is so fluid, the situation is by no means unremittingly bleak for the left.

In one sense, the course of recent events in Italy is highly positive. The squalid Christian Democrat-Socialist collaboration that has been the centre of gravity of the political system since the late 1970s is in serious trouble. The DC is crumbling in its Catholic strongholds, and the **PSI's** existence as even a medium-sized party has been called into question by a barrage of scandals that has unleashed unprecedented numbers of protest votes. But these votes have not gone to the left. The protest has been captured by the regionalistic populists of the Northern Leagues, which made a breakthrough in the 1992 general elections, obtaining nearly 10 percent of the vote nationwide, and twice that in the North. The Leagues have shaken off the ethnic, anti-southern bias and outright separatism of their earliest days, but they remain ill-defined and untested politically.' At the same time, their growth not only continues in their northern strongholds but shows signs of expanding into other areas of the North-Centre of the country.

How did the left, and the country, arrive at this situation? What are the options, and the dangers, that they face? In a situation in which events are breaking so rapidly, it would be pointless to attempt to provide a complete chronicle of events, and silly to make too many predictions. What is not only possible but absolutely necessary, however, is to outline the most important aspects of recent developments on the left, and within the party system as it slides between decomposition and, possibly, reaggregation. This will at least provide us with a vantage point from which to assess the way the political situation is unfolding.

Italian Communism on the Road to Dissolution

The **PCI's** final agonies showed, among many other things, the poverty (and simplicity) of commonly-used analytical categories on the left (and elsewhere). Because it never easily fitted preconceived models of what a Communist Party should resemble, or what the more orthodox **CPs** actually *did* resemble, people used to argue that the **PCI** was 'not really' a Communist Party, or that it was simply the 'functional equivalent' of social democracy. Although this assessment – delivered with contempt or admiration, depending on the analyst's standpoint – was persuasive in many respects, it was also a rather simplistic shorthand. That the **PCI** was not a typical Communist Party was apparent from its size and behaviour, which

in important respects did resemble the mass parties of the Second International. But that it was also a *real* Communist Party was equally evident.

That the **PCI** was something quite different from a social-democratic party became fully evident when it tried to break with its past. The last (20th) Congress of the **PCI**, which became the founding congress of the Democratic Party of the Left (PDS), was to have been akin to Italian Communism's Bad Godesberg, 30 years after German Social Democracy's break with orthodox Marxism and its alteration in the direction of a catch-all Volkspartei, or people's party. The Italian Communists had never been as proletarian as the strongest Socialist Parties, and they had moved away from Marxist orthodoxies from the 1960s onward. Still, when the leadership tried to take the last step and sanction formally what had been in effect for a long time, the reaction was ferocious.

How do we explain this situation? From the end of the 1960s onward, the **PCI** really had no clear strategy other than to avoid isolation and eventually to be accepted as a partner in government. What it did have was a strong social presence, a solid organizational and electoral base, and enough flexibility and openness to hold its own and avoid the self-destructive impulses of other Communist Parties (the Spanish and French come immediately, and unflatteringly, to mind). As time passed, these qualities showed their limitations. Capitalist restructuring, along with the party's own floundering, took their inevitable toll, and the siren call of change became irresistible. Not to adjust to altered conditions promised a slow, but steady, decline into irrelevancy: between 1976 and 1987, the party's popular support slipped inexorably downward, from 34.4 to 26.6 percent. In addition to electoral decline and political isolation, the **PCI** was saddled with a cumbersome bureaucratic structure that could not keep pace with changing times and increasingly represented an intolerable financial drain on the party's diminishing resources.'

Yet significant change also entailed serious risks – more serious, it turned out, than many had assumed. Precisely because the party for so long had been an amalgam of tendencies and sensibilities with no clear programme, its identity and traditions served as a bonding agent that held together conflicting, sometimes incompatible, groupings. Its traditions and identity had changed over time, but until the 1980s they had generally done so at a glacial pace.' The slowness of its evolution was criticized as much by those who wanted the **PCI** to engage with the new forces in Italian society as it was by those whose aim was to jettison the past and assume a Labour or Social-Democratic identity. Above all, however, because of the party leadership's instinctive understanding that the **PCI** was its identity, this evolution took place slowly to allow the entire party to move in unison. To break the vicious circle of **continuity** and stagnation meant opening the possibility of fragmentation and dispersal. A dangerous undertaking at any time, this was especially risky in the conditions in which the **PCI** found itself at the end of the 1980s, as events quickly revealed.

The immediate cause of PCI secretary Occhetto's 1989 decision to change the party's name and symbol was, of course, the collapse of the Soviet empire in Eastern Europe. His dramatic decision was announced just days after the Berlin Wall fell, by which time many people on the left had already concluded that the label 'Communist' no longer had any *raison d'être*. But his decision touched off a firestorm of dissent in the PCI, paralysing the party for a year and a half: the change was announced in November, 1989, and it took two party congresses before the PDS was finally born in Rimini in February, 1991. This internal struggle was so intense and lacerating that it paralysed the party's initiatives in the political and social sphere. As the PCI tore itself apart, the novelty of Occhetto's *svolta*, or turnaround, wore off, and the benefits the new party was to have reaped by freeing itself from a cumbersome (and sometimes embarrassing) vast never materialized.

The left would undoubtedly have opposed the *svolta* on its merits, but the opposition was especially furious because many people felt betrayed by Occhetto. After taking over the leadership of the PCI in 1987, i.e. long before the collapse of the USSR and its empire, Occhetto initiated a series of far-reaching changes in the party. In 1989, at the PCI's 18th National Congress, he obtained 90 percent support and appeared to have re-launched the party with a programme that called for an overhaul and opening-up of its structure and internal practices, all the while keeping its historical name and symbol.

Yet barely eight months after embarking on what was supposed to be the construction of a new PCI – and winning over the left wing in the process – Occhetto shattered the 18th Congress's equilibrium. The proposal of a complete break with the past and the creation of a party with a new name, symbol, structure and programme drove most of the left, and others as well, into the opposition. Occhetto had wanted to move swiftly, but resistance proved so strong that extensive, and exhausting, debates were required to head off a catastrophic schism. The fiercely-contested 19th Congress (1990) was originally supposed to put an end to the PCI and launch a new party. But internal resistance forced the congress to focus exclusively on the *principle* of founding a new party. And while the 19th Congress ended with two-thirds of the PCI accepting the change, a third remained hostile.

With a split involving much of the PCI's left wing appearing a very real possibility, Occhetto had to try to minimize the damage. Only the right wing, representing a fifth of the membership, seemed willing, in the name of coherence, to let the dissidents leave. A massive exodus of dissidents would, of course, have greatly facilitated the new party's march to the right.

No matter which way he turned, Occhetto encountered serious problems. One of the major reasons for the *svolta* was the assumption that, free

of the baggage of the past, a new party would appeal to a reservoir of progressive noncommunist forces that was presumed to exist in Italy. (Prominent intellectuals had for some time posited the existence of a 'submerged left', and a network of **leftwing** 'clubs' sprung up in the late 1980s.) However large this latent constituency might have been, the drawn-out, inward-looking debate – necessary to deal with internal dissent – quickly dissipated the outside world's interest and stymied the party's effectiveness.

Emblematic of the new party's divisions and its difficulties in projecting a convincing image was the embarrassing way it was born. Confident that his centrist majority was 'self-sufficient', Occhetto enraged both the left and the right at the founding congress playing each off against the other on various votes, first isolating the left on organizational questions, and then joining with the left to defeat the right on the Gulf War, which was underway at the time. At the very end of the congress, Occhetto discovered that he did not have as much freedom to manoeuvre as he had thought. In the voting for the first secretary-general of the PDS, he was openly opposed by the left, and quietly sabotaged by the right, whose abstentions deprived him of the absolute majority of votes required by the party statute. The congress ended with no party secretary and Occhetto in hiding. Only after he publicly apologised for his high-handedness and made explicit overtures to the right was he finally elected secretary. The message clearly was that the party leadership could take nothing for granted, and that the factions were forces to be reckoned with.

Divisions within the party

From the mid-1950s on, a number of ideological tendencies had evolved and coexisted within the PCI; though not allowed to organize, they were, as a rule, openly **tolerated**.⁴ **Broadly** speaking, the left retained an ill-defined but consistently-expressed conviction that capitalism had to be transcended. It was suspicious of institutional mediation, favouring social mobilization and confrontation. It was especially suspicious of suggestions that the party assume a governing role. And while extremely critical of the USSR, the left tended to be less Atlanticist than the rest of the party. In contrast, the right emphasized building political coalitions, and its favoured interlocutors were the historic parties of the left, the Socialists (PSI) and the much smaller Social-Democrats (**PSDI**).⁵ The right consistently called for the **PCI** to assume a governing role, and it frequently diagnosed 'emergencies' that required the party's presence in power to save Italian democracy. Over time, the right's sympathies for mainstream Western traditions and alliances **led** it to advocate a complete break with the communist tradition and the acquisition of a modern Labour or Social Democratic profile, earning its followers the labels laboristior, more often, miglioristi (meliorists). It always privileged relations with the PSI above

everything else, even when the Socialists seemed dedicated to a permanent embrace with the DC. The right's leading figure has for some time been Giorgio Napolitano, who commands great personal respect among all wings of the party.

These original tendencies became more blurred in the 1970s, after party secretary Enrico Berlinguer proposed his 'historic compromise' strategy. This advocated Catholic-Communist collaboration – a theme dear to the left of the party. But it also called for a rapid entry of the **PCI** into national power: in practice, Catholic-Communist turned out to mean a **DC-PCI** condominium. Berlinguer saw the **PCI** and DC as the representatives of Italy's healthy, popular forces, and he held the **PSI** in contempt for its lack of a mass presence and constant vacillations. This scornful attitude toward the smaller **PSI** was always present in parts of the **PCI**, but it became widespread under **Berlinguer**. It was of course not lost on the Socialists, who were groping for a new identity under **Bettino Craxi** during the same period. Berlinguer's vision eventually won over many of his comrades, and had an especially strong impact on a new generation of Communists – and there were many of them – who came to the party and rose in its ranks in the 1970s.

In addition to the evolution of Italian Communist ideological and political tendencies, the 1970s also saw the further enrichment of discourses within the party as the **PCI** absorbed new ideas and forces from an increasingly complex and secularized society.⁶ It absorbed some of these new issues in incomplete and often contradictory fashion, especially when the new clashed directly with older entrenched positions (e.g. environmentalism and opposition to nuclear energy). The lack of previous attention to certain issues also rendered the **PCI** vulnerable to intellectual fashions: when a handful of ranking feminists came to subscribe to **Luz Irigaray's** very distinctive ideas, these soon became official policy for the entire party. Though many feminists (and others) found the language and practice of Irigaray's supporters obscure or sectarian, the 'politics of sexual difference' actually became enshrined in the **PDS's** founding statute. Thus, as the party's fortunes turned downward and its **organization** stagnated and shrank in the 1980s, internal alignments crystallized around both classical and new issues. By the late 1980s, a mixture of fairly coherent ideologies coexisted with a variety of far more diffuse sensibilities. The ensemble was lively, but highly fragmented. It was primarily held together by the common tradition that was about to be eliminated.

Real world political divisions do not usually follow strictly philosophical and ideological fault lines. The 'centrist' tendency around Occhetto is radically different from the **Berlinguer** 'centre' that dominated the party for over a decade. Indeed, the *svolta* badly divided the *berlingueriani*: many were attached to the **PCI's** historical legacy and convinced that Occhetto's actions were ill-judged and improvised. They were, however,

excited by the idea of the party in government, and recognized that a break with the past would hasten that eventuality. In the end, the *berlingueriani* split, with numerous older leaders joining an opposition comprised largely of people with far more radical temperaments than their own, whom they had fought for most of their political lives.

At the same time, while many leftists within the party joined the opposition to the *svolta*, others backed the secretary, at times enthusiastically, but more often with serious reservations.' Some of the most radical feminists had sided with Occhetto, for he and his collaborators had been open to their concerns. But they and others in the majority were extremely uncomfortable with the institutional implications of the *svolta*: the rush to change the party's name was seen as a naked bid for approval by the governing parties. They were also unhappy with the new Occhetto-migliorista alliance. Still, many leftists were firmly convinced that a break with the past was needed for a genuine restructuring of the Italian left, even though this meant furling the flag of Italian Communism. They were also determined to offset the influence of the reformists within the majority. Occhetto tried to keep a door open to the left, not only to avoid a split, but because many of his own supporters were distrustful of what they perceived as the right wing's infatuation with the Socialists and, worse yet, with **Bettino Craxi**.

Many on the **PCI** left were also taken aback at the composition of the opposition, which, as we have seen, threw together disgruntled *berlingueriani* along with the bulk of the historic left, usually identified with Pietro Ingrao. The Opposition also included some of the most radical elements of the **PCI's** old left wing such as the ex-Manifesto group (expelled in the late 1960s but readmitted a decade later) led by Lucio Magri and Luciana Castellina as well as the more militant ecologists and other new movement activists who were convinced that institutional mediations would suffocate the grass-roots initiatives they favoured. But the opposition counted as well on **Armando Cossutta** and his considerable rank-and-file following. The *cossuttiani* favoured social mobilization and an oppositional role for the party. They were also throwbacks to an old pro-Soviet line that had been marginal in the **PCI** since the 1970s, and that had been in an especially awkward position throughout Gorbachev's period of rule. They never obtained more than 3 or 4 percent support at party congresses, but everyone knew that their passive support was extensive, especially at the grass roots. Cossutta was an embarrassment, but the opposition – and, later, *Rifondazione*, needed his 'troops'.

Combinations of the many viewpoints within the party crystallized into the 'motions' that supported or opposed Occhetto at the 19th Congress of 1990 and then at the 20th Congress in 1991, which became the 1st Congress of the **PDS**. These far from compact groupings make up the factions that dominate the **PDS** today. Even after the departure of nostalgic old-style

communists and the most socially radical elements for Rifondazione, the left that remains within the PDS remains a mixed bag. The largest left-wing faction has taken the name 'Democratic Communists', and is led by a number of elder statesmen, including, most prominently, Ingrao, the 77-year-old historic leader of the PCI left. But this group includes, in addition to classical leftists in the PCI tradition, ex-berlingueriani who represent a broad range of ideological positions but are fiercely anti-Socialist. The left suffered its most serious setback with the schism: although the bulk of the group remained in the PDS, many of Ingrao's followers departed. Not long afterward, the ex-Manifesto group also exited for Rifondazione. It had remained in the PDS with the goal of building bridges to Rifondazione and other elements outside the new party. When it became clear that the Democratic Communists would concentrate their efforts on the PDS's internal struggles, Magri and his comrades made their exit.

The centrist majority of the PDS is the most heterogeneous of all PDS groupings. Its major fault line, not surprisingly, has been the issue of under which circumstances it would entertain the idea of entering a national government. Occhetto, concerned about the total disrepute into which politics-as-usual had fallen, was hesitant after the general elections to commit the PCI to anything that might appear as a bailout of a weak government. In contrast, despite his well-known antipathy for Craxi and the PSI, Massimo D'Alema, considered number two in the PDS, was more inclined to negotiate terms with a weak governmental majority that needed all the support it could muster – until the League's spectacular success in limited local elections late in 1992. Since the PDS held up relatively well against the newest wave of protest votes for the Leagues, most centrists concluded that it would be suicidal for the party to associate itself with a discredited political class. (The PDS/PCI had also been implicated in the scandals, but on nothing like the scale of the DC or PSI.)

The reformists, whose influence increased within the majority after the foundation of the PDS, had the ground cut out from under them at every turn in 1992. Their consistent obsession with the Socialists cost them dearly during the general election campaign, as Craxi rebuffed their overtures. Craxi showed that he was less interested in a serious alliance with the reformists than with doing everything possible to make life difficult for the PDS. He was not above trying to woo unhappy miglioristi away from the PDS altogether. When a reformist broke with the PDS to become the 'independent' mayor of Milan with Socialist votes, Craxi's credibility sank to zero among his former suitors in the PDS, and Napolitano and his faction were humiliated. Following the elections, as the PSI was buried under an avalanche of indictments and scandals, and as the governing parties fell into increasing public disfavour, the PDS's right wing was further isolated internally. Some of its members even began to recognize the political stupidity of insisting on a governing role under

prevailing conditions. By the middle of 1992, with most trends running against them, the *miglioristi* had been pushed out of the majority.

With the established parties increasingly discredited and political debate shifting toward a discussion of electoral reform, the centrists and reformists of the PDS went hunting for allies to create the sort of progressive bloc that would have wide enough appeal to stand a chance in a **winner-take-all** competition. The reformists, predictably, sought out the Socialists with whom they had always been closest. The centrists also made overtures to dissident members of the PSI, but Occhetto announced a far more ambitious goal: a complete recomposition of the left that included elements of the PSI, the smaller lay parties of the centre left, left-wing Catholics and Greens and other exponents of new social movements.

Rifondazione comunista

That **Armando Cossutta** and his coterie would refuse to join the PDS when it was created was a given. But until almost the eve of the PDS's foundation it was unclear how many former followers of Enrico Berlinguer, and above all how many of those from the Ingrao left would follow the *cossuttiani* and other dissidents out of the party. At the final reckoning, the schism was quite contained. Ingrao's unwillingness to rule out a split, and Occhetto's concessions, might well have wasted precious time. But the worst-case scenario was avoided. Moreover, in spite of historic trade-union firebrand Sergio Garavini's prominence in the opposition, and then in *Rifondazione*, the exit of union leaders from the PDS was minimal. (Garavini became the secretary of the new party, and Cossutta became its president.)

Rifondazione would thus not be a miniature, more militant version of the old PCI, as many dissidents had hoped. Instead, it would become more of a grab-bag of **everyone** on the left who was unhappy with the PDS, dominated at the base by ex-Communists. Alongside the *cossuttiano* rank-and-file were ex-Manifesto people, several *ingraiani* and *berlingueriani*, and a smattering of militant-feminists, **greens, and** gays, who felt that the PDS would devote itself to institutional manoeuvring rather than aggressive social struggles. These were not the ex-comrades with whom Cossutta had most **looked** forward to **working**. Democrazia Proletaria, itself an eclectic ex-New Left group that combined workerism, feminism, and environmentalism with a long record of hostility toward the PCI (but also the Soviets), dissolved itself and joined *Rifondazione*, adding its **4** deputies to the **7** who initially broke with the PCI.

Following the schism, a struggle over the legal right to the PCI's name and symbol did not help the image of either *Rifondazione* or the PDS. More than nostalgia was involved, for the use of a very well-known symbol on the official ballot might attract an avalanche of votes. (Such considerations had helped convince Occhetto to include a miniature version of the

old PCI symbol in the PDS's new logo.) Similarly, since the PDS had inherited a large amount of valuable real estate from the PCI, huge sums of money were involved. The courts eventually gave the PDS title to the PCI's property, but allowed Rifondazione to contest the 1992 elections with a symbol very similar to that of the former PCI.

Rifondazione's real challenge to the PDS was in the support it attracted. Within a few weeks of the Rimini congress, the group claimed over 110,000 members.* D'Alema called these numbers wildly inflated, but, surveying the state of the PDS's left wing, Ingrao noted, 'We have to recognize that the majority of our base no longer exists.' By the end of 1991, *Rifondazione* claimed 150,000 members in 600 local organizations, and PDS recruitment drives were encountering problems in areas (Turin, Rome, parts of Tuscany) where Rifondazione was strong.

Rifondazione's fortunes initially appeared mixed, with several embarrassing reminders of its own internal divisions. The abortive coup that nearly toppled Mikhail Gorbachev in August, 1991, led Cossutta – whose antipathy for Gorbachev was common knowledge – to remark that he was glad to see Gorbachev deposed. When the coup failed and Gorbachev effectively abolished the CPSU, Cossutta was put in a difficult situation. He acknowledged that the CPSU had been a 'disaster' for some time, but said it was nonetheless 'a tragic error' to dissolve it." Cossutta's prominence hurt *Rifondazione's* public image, but the large number of members he could speak for gave him vital leverage: nearly a third (5 of 17) of *Rifondazione's* Coordinating Committee are cossuttiani." More embarrassment followed the next year, when the cossuttiani joined with some of their ex-Communist comrades to block Luciana Castellina's promotion to the editorship of the party newspaper. This was a blatant settling of (very) old scores: some of the more sectarian elements of the PCI (and now *Rifondazione*) apparently could never forgive someone who had broken ranks with the old party and criticized it – and the Soviets – so severely from the left from the late 1960s onward. Garavini reacted angrily to this particularly vindictive form of factionalism, and hinted that he might be forced to resign if this was the way the new party intended to settle political differences. Thanks to his intervention and the equally angry reaction of others in *Rifondazione*, Castellina eventually did become editor.

Despite some initial missteps, Rifondazione had several things going for it in the early 1990s. The first was its limited, but compact, organizational base and reasonably strong presence throughout the country, save in historically 'white areas'. In the 1992 vote, Rifondazione was in the 7 – 9 percent range in areas of historic working class and/or Communist strength. This showing hardly makes it a major political power, but it also means that it cannot be dismissed out of hand. Even more decisive in Rifondazione's relative success is the fact that this is clearly a party with clean hands that does not accept the status quo. The term 'protest vote' can

easily be misused, but it certainly applies to at least a part of the support that *Rifondazione* has been able to attract. *Rifondazione's* problems, in some ways, are those of the rest of the left: it is host to a variety of views that are in profound tension with one another; at least some of these are totally contradictory. But as long as it remains a small opposition party, these tensions can generally be avoided. Its fate under an electoral system that forced alliances within broad ideological blocs would be far less certain, which is one reason that *Rifondazione* is one of the strongest supporters of proportional representation.

The Unravelling of the Italian Party System

Perhaps the only positive aspect to the sad spectacle of the **PCI's** hastening its own demise was that in doing so, the **PCI** also speeded up the disintegration of the Italian party system and whatever realignment of political forces will eventually emerge.

Of all the capitalist democracies, the Italian party system has probably been the most immobile throughout the postwar period. Despite profound social transformations and some of the most tumultuous and extended social mobilization anywhere in the West, Italians, in maddeningly predictable fashion, trooped to the polls and returned the same parties to parliament – and to power. This immobilism was, with considerable truth, attributed to the Cold War. With the largest Communist Party in the West dominating the opposition and with the 'governing area' totally hegemonized by Christian Democracy, the **DC** became the key player in every one of Italy's postwar governments.

Cold War logic might explain why the party system polarized around the **PCI** and the **DC**, but it doesn't tell us how the system could reproduce itself so faithfully for so long. Between 1953 and 1987, Italian elections provided lots of spectacle but only occasional drama. This happened because the polarization took place within a context that combined a permissive system of proportional representation, well-entrenched Catholic and 'red' subcultures, and the lavish use of state resources for clientelistic and patronage purposes. The most extreme illustration of predictability involves the party that was the fulcrum of the system: in the five elections between 1963 and 1979, the **DC's** vote fluctuated less than a single percentage point (38.3 – 39.1).

The dramatic moments occurred when the **DC** was forced to broaden or consolidate its coalition, which it always managed to do at others' expense. In the 1960s, the **DC** brought the medium-sized (15 percent) Socialists (**PSI**) into the ruling coalition and reactionary elements within the secret services tried, but bungled, a coup d'etat. The Socialists lost much of their credibility and a third of their votes over the next several years, as they remained in a coalition that clearly had no intention of carrying out serious

reforms. In the mid-1970s, following a long period of social mobilization, the PCI obtained nearly 35 percent of the vote, and almost managed to force the Christian Democrats to end its exclusion from power. But the Communists were then hung up between government and opposition by DC manoeuvring and their own fecklessness. This brush with national power helped legitimize the PCI, but it also tarnished the party's reputation for having 'clean hands' and being unlike the other parties. It was also becoming painfully evident that the Communists did not really have a programme or broader project.

At the end of the 1970s, the Socialists once more came to the Christian Democrats' rescue, though they extracted a much higher price for their collaboration this time around. Thus, by the 1980s, the PCI was again isolated in the opposition: with its vote below 30 percent (and falling) and the PSI back in government, the PCI could no longer block DC-led coalitions. Italian politics in the 1980s was marked by a constant and public battle between the DC and PSI over the considerable political spoils the Italian system, with its massive state-run holdings, offers to those who hold national power. The distortions generated by this system are perhaps nowhere more evident than in the fact that the left opposition, through much of the 1980s, was one of the strongest proponents of privatization (strictly regulated, to be sure), while the DC tried to sabotage or delay serious reform proposals. The laws of the market are brutal, but they at least hold out the occasional hope of dynamism and growth; when the alternative is to turn a chunk of the economy into the fief of a party faction under the direction of political hacks, even leftists began to conclude that the market might be preferable.

The DC and PSI thus remained committed to a symbiotic, ugly, relationship. The extraordinary electoral stability of the past had given way to more volatility, but the marginalization of the Communists and the small size and fragmentation of the new political forces that did spring up appeared to make the DC-PSI tandem even more irreplaceable.

The system had shown signs of weakening in the 1980s, but it only began to unravel when Occhetto undertook the conversion of the PCI into the PDS at the end of the decade. We have seen how divisive and costly this transformation proved to be in political terms. Electorally, the price was also high: in the 1992 general elections, the PDS got just over 16 percent, and even when its vote is added to *Rifondazione comunista's* 5.6 percent, the total is still more than 4 points less than what the PCI had obtained in 1987. If we recall that Proletarian Democracy (1.7 percent in 1987) dissolved itself to co-found *Rifondazione* with the dissidents from the former PCI, we see that the 'hammer and sickle left' lost nearly 6 percent between 1987 and 1992.

The PCI's abrupt exit from the scene obviously catalyzed the changes that had been underway for years. With the 'red menace' gone, the 1992

elections saw the DC fall below 30 percent for the first time. The governing coalition barely managed to scrape together half the seats in parliament. And, as we have seen, the Socialists were literally disintegrating by late 1992 following the failure of their broad strategy and their involvement in kickback scandals.

Who were the winners in this debacle? Rifondazione certainly exceeded all but the most optimistic expectations in garnering nearly 6 percent of the vote, though Proletarian Democracy's contribution to the total meant that not all these votes came from the former PCI. Another 6 percent of the vote went to several small lists with a progressive colouration (Greens, remnants of the Radical Party, etc.).

But the biggest winner of all unquestionably was the Northern League, or Lega Nord, which obtained nearly 10 percent of the vote nationwide by running against the Roman bureaucracy and the entire DC-led system. An amalgam of three regionalist movements under the hegemony of the Lombard League's charismatic leader **Umberto Bossi**, the Lega Nord was contesting national elections for the first time in this form." The Lega's support is very unevenly distributed, with its high points (over 25 percent) found in the Catholic North-East that used to be the DC's area of social as well as political dominance. But it surpassed 14 percent almost everywhere in the North, and has made an amazingly strong showing in some of the most advanced and urbanized areas of the country. It has gained most at the expense of the DC, but the League made inroads into the vote of all parties (which helps explain why the PDS plus Rifondazione combined still fell almost 5 percent short of the PCI's old vote).

Moreover, events following the elections showed that the League was anything but a flash in the pan and that the general elections had understated its potential. The kickback scandals broke during the electoral campaign, and as the evidence (and indictments) mounted against the PSI and DC over the course of the year, the Lega kept rising in opinion polls. In partial local elections held late in the year, the League became the largest party in important northern cities and their provinces (Mantua and Monza), scoring between 30 and 40 percent in these areas and making significant advances in areas where it had been much weaker just a few months earlier. By early 1993, local League governments with external PDS support were beginning to take shape in some northern centres.

The League's dramatic advances energized the debate over institutional reform that had been dragging on for years despite signs of increasing public outrage against the spoils system dominated by the traditional parties. In 1991, a referendum was held to limit to one the number of personal preference votes on ballots—the buying and trading of which were notorious among powerful economic (and criminal) power blocs within the ruling parties. The referendum took place against DC and PSI hostility: a maverick Christian Democrat led the petition campaign, while

Socialist secretary **Bettino** Craxi arrogantly announced that he would go to the seashore on voting day. He asked his followers to do likewise, for a turnout below 50 percent invalidates a referendum. Two-thirds of the voters ignored Craxi's advice, and 96 percent of them voted to limit preferences.

But DC and PSI foot-dragging continued into 1992, reflecting their desire to hang on to a system of power, as well as their disagreement over the shape political reforms should take. The Leagues' inroads into Catholic strongholds and grass-roots pressures had forced the DC to begin making cosmetic changes to its image, and to start to change its tune on reforms. As for the PSI, neither the general elections (where their losses were limited), nor the kickback scandals (denounced as a conspiracy against the party), nor increasing signs of rebellion within the party moved the Socialist leadership to act. Only when Craxi himself was officially accused on forty counts of corruption-related charges and PSI support began to dissolve later in the year did the Socialists begin to show signs of responding to the situation.

The (Unlamented) Collapse of Italian Socialism

Background: The Craxian strategy.

Even as scandals undermined the last vestiges of Socialist credibility, **Bettino** Craxi continued with an all-out defence of his party and the system of party power in Italy, as well as of his choice of alliance with the Christian Democrats.

Following the **PSI's** re-entry into government in 1979, it appeared for a time that Craxi would be able to hammer away at the DC all the while sharing power with it. His first stint as prime minister (1983 – 86) gave the Italian Republic its longest-lived government, despite DC efforts to sabotage him at every turn – 'snipers' within his own coalition put him in a minority 163 times during this period. More importantly, his tenure at the head of the government seemed to bear out claims that he and his party represented the country's dynamic, modernizing forces, whereas the DC (and the PCI, which he wanted to keep in the opposition until it was cut down to size) were vestiges of old-style politics, locked into obsolete structures and mind-sets.

The Craxian strategy paid off at the polls: in 1987, following his two terms as prime minister, the Socialists climbed to over 14 percent; when he took over the party in 1976, the **PSI** had just under 10 percent. Perhaps even more importantly, the Communists had gone from 34.4 to 26.6 percent in the same period. Craxi's Mitterrandian dream of eroding the **PCI** and having the Socialists dominate an eventual left alternative was a

long way from being realized, but he had carried his party in the desired direction, projecting a decisive image while the PCI floundered.

But however much Mitterrand may have dropped the leftist baggage he carried into office, he built his legitimacy in clear opposition to the centre-right coalition that governed France until he displaced it. Craxi mouthed left-alternative platitudes while pushing the construction of an alliance with the PCI off into the future. He continued to criticize the Communists for not changing enough, for not being sincere democrats, and, above all, for not renouncing their past and calling themselves Socialists. Occhetto's *svolta* should have been cause for joy in the PSI, but Craxi's constant criticism of the process showed that he really was not interested in building bridges on his left.

After the DC finally wrenched the prime ministership out of his hands in 1987, Craxi kept his party in the government. As the 1980s wore on, the modernizing challenge he had launched at his larger coalition partner was muted as the two parties' relations increasingly degenerated into a public struggle for the enormous levers of patronage and clientelism available to those who govern Italy. Finding the centrist power-brokers of the DC more to his liking, Craxi made common cause with them, helping to isolate and ultimately defeat the leader of the Christian Democrats' left-wing faction at the end of the 1980s.

The 1980s: toward a symbiotic spoils system.

The squabble over the division of political spoils has been a hallmark of Italian politics, but it became more acute in the 1980s for a number of reasons. For one thing, the DC was weaker and therefore more vulnerable to political blackmail from coalition partners it desperately needed. As one Socialist leader put it, why should the DC control 80 percent of the institutions with only 30 percent of the vote?¹⁴ Moreover, precisely because it lacked the subcultural roots and organizational traditions of the country's two largest parties (even though these were rapidly eroding), the PSI relied heavily on expensive mass media and communications investments to offset what it saw as the others' advantages. Perhaps most importantly of all, whatever broader political vision Craxi originally had possessed soon gave way to nothing more than a venal fight over political booty; in the process, his party dropped the last remnants of its 'competitive alliance' with the DC and became a full-fledged participant in what the Italians call *lottizzazione*, the apportionment of patronage according to political weight, but with the express purpose of obtaining for the PSI far more than 15 percent of the levers of power.

By the 1992 elections, the extent to which the Socialists had become mired in the spoils system was evident in the regional distribution of their vote. This party, born in the industrial heartland of the North and until recently still able to boast considerable support in the Milanese working

class, now was weakest in the North, where the Leagues cut deeply into its (and the DC's) voters. It was strongest by far in the patronage-riddled South, where it had become the second largest party, and where its control of resources had obviously paid off. Predictably, its organizational base shifted southward as well, as local party bosses grossly inflated their membership rolls to increase their weight at party congresses. It is telling that the PSI effectively abandoned its claim to represent Italy's rising strata: Craxi's idea of modernization now seemed to be limited to changing Italy into a presidential regime – with himself as the choice for president. His ambitions changed from wanting to be the Italian Mitterrand to seeing himself as the Italian de Gaulle.

None of these developments seemed to bother those in the leadership around Craxi. Though their commitment to change might be cynical and self-serving, the Christian Democrats at least came out of the 1992 elections with a sense that the ruling parties could not arrogantly continue past practices while repeating that they were the solution to Italy's problems; Craxi did just that. Of course, for the DC, the sting of the Leagues was particularly strong (they lost 5 percent compared to the PSI's 1 percent), but there is more to it than that: the DC lost most heavily to the Leagues in many of its historical Catholic strongholds, and hence could not avoid drawing the conclusion that it was in deep trouble. As a party that had lost any semblance of its mass character years before, the PSI no longer had such antennae.

Only repeated scandals, aggravated by Craxi's insistence that the judicial inquiries were a plot against the PSI, finally galvanized internal dissent and made it go public. By the middle of 1992, some of those who had always felt that the Socialists should have looked to the left for political allies, to the PCI and, above all, to the new PDS, began to speak out openly against his leadership. One of the fiercest early critics was **Ottaviano Del Turco**, leader of the Socialist faction in the largest union confederation, the CGIL (his relatively autonomous power-base enabled him to speak out with impunity). As the scandals mounted, and the PSI began to crumble in the North and even suffer reversals in the South, a sense of political survival finally drove some of Craxi's erstwhile collaborators to turn against him. But even after being apprised of the charges pending against him, Craxi continued to hold onto his post and promise a fight to save his good name.

These acts made his (by now inevitable) resignation far more drawn-out and lacerating than it should have been, with incalculable, and probably irreversible, damage to his party. The question on many people's minds was how much would be salvageable of the PSI after 15 years of Craxi, during which the party had been irrevocably altered. If a new leadership instituted a thorough purge of corrupt elements, would anything other than a few healthy shreds be left? And how many leaders would be able to

carry out a renovation free of the taint of corruption and collusion, since for so many years, the only way to rise in the party had been to show loyalty to its maximum leader?

'Transverse Alliances' and the Politics of Honesty and Electoral Reform

Following the 1992 elections, the Italian Parliament established a Commission for Institutional Reform to review a system that, by common agreement, needs a serious overhaul. Given the malfunctioning of Italian institutions and increasing invocations of a Second Republic, the degree to which serious political discussion and struggle has focused on the electoral system is striking.

It is striking, but it is not surprising, for three reasons. The first of these is that an extremely large and heterogeneous array of political forces that has little else in common does agree about the need to break the grip of *partitocrazia*, or 'partyocracy', the suffocating presence of the parties throughout society and the economy. The electoral system is seen as a direct and rapid way to weaken party bureaucrats and power brokers. The second reason is that, with the decline of the historically dominant governing and opposition parties," the party system has fragmented to a point where few people continue to defend PR for its ability to reflect diversity. PR was rightly seen as a guarantee against marginalization by the left during the height of the cold war,¹⁶ and it permitted the preservation of disparate voices as well as the rise of numerous new forces. But even many former supporters of PR acknowledge that times have changed, and they are appalled at the proliferation of very small lists. Only 3 of the 16 lists that won seats in the Chamber of Deputies in 1992 gained over 10 percent of the vote, and 10 lists were below 5 percent. The third reason, which was decisive in making the DC (and the PDS) abandon their preference for some modification of PR and embrace the principle of a single-member plurality system, is the astonishingly rapid rise of the Leagues, reflecting Italians' disgust with the existing state of affairs. As long as there were no real threats to its dominance, the DC could wince at its losses and continue as always; when the Leagues started breathing down its neck in the 1992 general elections, and when it was actually outpolled later that year, the DC was forced to act. Anything less than a radical break with the past is now framed as perpetuating the old, rotten, system.

As has been the case in Italy for more than a decade, those leading the movement for reforms have generally come from the fringes of the major parties, or from outside them altogether. They have also followed tradition by using referenda as a means of public agitation and as a way to force action on a recalcitrant legislature." But in contrast to previous occasions, this time the movement has set loose forces that directly threaten the established parties, and above all the DC. A maverick, middle-of-the-road Christian Democrat, Mario Segni, was the animator of the **referendum-**

based assault that is far from over. After the 1992 elections, he created a 'reform movement' for honest government that consciously evokes the Popular Party of Luigi Sturzo, which was the original forerunner to the DC. Nervous Church and DC officials began to worry openly that Segni might be establishing a new moderate bloc.

The moderates' success was such that at least two similar 'alliances' have begun to take shape on the left; each cuts across existing political divisions to enlist the support of leaders and members from a mix of parties. And this comes in the wake of an earlier 'transverse' phenomenon: the 'Network' List led by the ex-Christian Democrat former mayor of Palermo, Leoluca Orlando, whose strong anti-mafia stance brought him popularity (and eventually drove him from the ruling party). The Network obtained 2 percent nationwide, and was strongest in the South, particularly Sicily. But the Network's second most prominent figure is **Diego** Novelli, the former Communist mayor of Turin, who opposed the end of the **PCI** and refused to join either the PDS or Rifondazione comunista. Instead, he cast his lot with Orlando and helped broaden the anti-mafia appeal into a more generic call for **government** by honest people. **Although** weak in most of the North, the Network captured nearly 5 percent of the vote in Turin in 1992, and it rose much higher in opinion polls following the kickback scandals.

These are very recent events, and the established parties do not appear inclined to fade from the scene without a fight, so it is obviously far too early to produce a death certificate for the Italian party system. Italian parties have always demonstrated remarkable resilience, and the DC, in particular, has already rushed to embrace reforms it could no longer avoid. **Still**, things will never be the same again, for the volatility and fragmentation that have appeared in the past few years are without precedent in postwar Italian history. To use the fashionable social-scientific terms, there is no question that a major decomposition and dealignment of the party system is underway. To date, however, there are far more 'morbid symptoms' in evidence than there are clear signs of what a fundamental recomposition or realignment would look like if it occurred.

The most tragic morbid symptom is the direct aftermath of the **PCI's** transformation into the PDS. These events show that analyses can be correct, but real organizations exist under real conditions and are bounded by real possibilities. For all of the criticisms that can be made of his impetuous and bumbling leadership style, in reality Occhetto faced a hopeless task. He felt he had to break with the past, but the conditions simply did not exist for a new departure. New political movements and organizations do not automatically spring into life as old ones wear out. With no broad social movements to feed a new **political** force, the transformation Occhetto hoped to carry out merely euthanized the old party and then revealed that the leadership of the new party really did not have a very clear idea of what it wanted.

Institutional arrangements are certainly important, but the rush to embrace institutional solutions such as the reform of the electoral system surely has to qualify as another morbid symptom. It is ironic—and it should give one pause—that in Britain the stampede appears to be in the opposite direction, toward PR.¹⁸ In the Italian case, there is naivete in the rush to embrace the single-member district, and especially in the belief that voting for individual candidates will force them to be responsible to the electorate while undercutting the role of party machines, for this is the argument used most frequently by supporters of the first-past-the-post system.

Moreover, while the single-member system (especially the two-ballot, runoff variant used in France) once appeared to be a promising way to force the left to unite against a moderate bloc dominated by the DC, recent developments have rendered this scenario problematic, not to say obsolete. The collapse of the Socialists and the meteoric rise of the Leagues complicates whatever neat left-right, government-opposition tendencies may have existed in the Italian party system. Recent events have created potentially troubling scenarios involving *three* major political groupings. And as anyone familiar with single-member plurality ballots knows, *three*-way divisions are not where such systems show themselves to best advantage. Would the PDS and DC band together to block the Leagues across the North, where the Leagues could well be the largest single party? On the other hand, if Bossi continues to sound more like a populist and less like an anti-southern racist, would progressive forces consider joining with him in a broad front to force the DC into the opposition? This is already taking place in some local governments in the North, to the dismay of those (including many of the left of the PDS and in *Rifondazione comunista*) who consider Bossi to be a demagogue at best and a racist at worst. The uncertainty is so great, and the protagonists so numerous, that it is unlikely that a 'pure' single-member system will emerge out of what is sure to be a tortuous series of compromises.

Discussions of this nature are highly speculative, and the real point is that they focus on institutional engineering and political alignments rather than the common programmes or projects around which political forces, new or old, might coalesce. This is lamentable, but it is, as they used to say, no accident. Despite all of the changes that have begun to take place on the Italian left, truly substantive discussions of what the left ought to stand for and how, specifically, it will change conditions for the better have been in short supply. As the rise of the Leagues shows, once the old rules break down, there are many ways to attack the status quo. It will be sad, and possibly tragic, if, having helped create a fluid and potentially promising situation, the left proves unable to help find a way out of it.

NOTES

1. The newness of the phenomenon has led to understandable confusion even in naming it. Several different regionalistic organizations formed in the 1980s. The most successful of these was the Lombard League, but similar organizations were created in Piedmont and the Veneto. Each was known by its title, e.g. Lega Lombarda, Liga Veneta, and collectively they were known as 'the Leagues'. In 1992, they formed a single list under the new title of Lega Nord, or Northern League. It has thus become common to refer to them in both the singular and plural, and I will follow this convention throughout.
2. For this period, see: Grant Amyot, 'The Italian Road to Reformism: The PCI and Occhetto's New Course', in R. Catanzaro and R.Y. Nanetti, eds., *Italian Politics: A Review*, Vol. 4 (London: Pinter, 1989); Martin J Bull, 'La svolta di Occhetto e la crisi del Pci', in Catanzaro and Filippo Sabetti, eds., *Politica in Italia Edizione 90* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1990); Frank Belloni, 'Il Partito comunista italiano in bilico tra la dissoluzione e l'ignoto', in Fausto Anderlini and Robert Leonardi, eds., *Politica in Italia Edizione 91* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1991); Gianfranco Pasquino, 'Programmatic Renewal and Much More: From the PCI to the PDS', Johns Hopkins Bologna Center Occasional Paper No. 66 (June, 1991); and S. Hellman, 'The Difficult Birth of the Democratic Party of the Left', in S. Hellman and G. Pasquino, eds., *Italian Politics: A Review*, Vol. 7 (London: Pinter, 1992).
3. These issues are discussed at length in S. Hellman, *Italian Communism in Transition: The Rise and Fall of the Historic Compromise in Turin, 1975 - 80* (N.Y.: Oxford Univ. Press, 1988).
4. For discussions of left-right differences and battles in the PCI, see G. Grant Amyot, *The Italian Communist Party: The Crisis of the Popular Front Strategy* (London: Croom Helm, 1980), and S. Hellman, 'Italian Communist Party Strategy and the Problem of Revolution in the West', in Shlomo Avineri, ed., *Varieties of Marxism* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1977), pp. 195 - 225.
5. The PSDI was formed in the late 1940s following a split with the PSI, which was perceived as too close to the Communists. It never had a significant presence in the working class and became a consistent junior partner in DC-dominated coalitions throughout the postwar period. Its electoral support oscillated between 3 and 6 percent.
6. In the crucial decade 1968-1977, membership increased from 1.5 to 1.8 million, with an average of roughly 100,000 new members each year. As these figures suggest, the turnover was extreme in this period, raising many problems, but underscoring the rejuvenation that took place. By the end of the 1970s, more than half of all Italian Communists had joined the PCI within the past ten years.
7. Several of them jokingly called themselves *malpancisti*, from the term *maldipancia*, which means 'bellyache'.
8. *Panorama*, 7 Apr. 1991, p. 53; *La Repubblica*, 22 March 1991, p. 4.
9. D'Alema is quoted in *l'Unità*, 20 March 1991, p. 5. For Ingrao's quote see *La Repubblica*, 22 March 1991, p. 4.
10. *La Repubblica*, 27 August 1991, p. 14.
11. The others were 10 *ingraiani* and 2 former members of the Pdup, which was linked to the Manifesto: *La Repubblica* 5/6 May 1991, p. 17.
12. See note 1. Bossi had previously been elected in the Lombard League to the Senate, where he was its only representative.
13. The turnout figure is high for a referendum. For details, see Patrick McCarthy, 'The Referendum of 9 June', in S. Hellman and G. Pasquino, eds., *Italian Politics: A Review*, Volume 7 (London: Pinter Publishers, 1992), pp. 11 - 28.
14. Quoted in Economist Intelligence Unit, *Italy: A Country Report*, No. 3, 1988, p. 9.
15. A classic measure of electoral volatility and dealignment: the combined vote of the top two parties since the high point in 1976 has declined precipitously: 73.1 (1976); 68.7 (1979); 62.8 (1983); 60.9 (1987); 45.8 (1992).
16. One of Italy's bitterest political battles took place in 1953 over an electoral law that would have given a minimum of two-thirds of the seats in parliament to any coalition obtaining a majority of popular votes. Dubbed 'The Swindle Law', this rule failed to go into effect in the 1953 elections by a few thousand votes and was then withdrawn.

17. **Despite** the notoriety of **the** referenda to abolish divorce (1974) and abortion (1981), most of Italy's referenda have **been organized** by **progressive** forces to try to **repeal** or **amend** laws regulating wage escalators, judges' liability, nuclear energy, hunting, pesticides, life **sentences**, law-and-order legislation, etc. A half-million valid signatures can **force** a referendum unless the courts rule it out of order, and drives to collect **the** signatures often become highly effective single-issue campaigns. **These** are **abrogative** referenda to abolish specified laws, and their threat is **often** sufficient to provoke **parliamentary** action. If parliament significantly changes or replaces the law in question, as has occurred five times in the past, **the** referendum is avoided.
18. For a good **sense** of the debate, see Peter Mair, 'The Question of Electoral Reform', and Michael Dummett, 'Toward a More Representative Voting System: The Plant Report', both in *New Left Review* 194 (July - August, 1992): 75 - 97; **98**- 113.