The Third Way in Italy: Chronicle of an Autumnal Romance

These days, Tony Blair, the longest-serving Labour Prime Minister in the history of Britain, can hardly appear at a grassroots event of the party he once led, unless it is heavily scripted and gated, for fear of heckling and catcalls. Yet in the country in which British Third Way grandees famously used to spend their holidays, Blair is still considered an example and an inspiration — and this despite the fact that Italy boasts a proud autonomous tradition of Left-wing politics, both at the level of theoretical development and of organizational achievement.

How should we understand Blair’s enduring authoritativeness in Italy, when in the cradle of the Third Way an old-school Socialist proves capable of winning the Labour leadership competition in a landslide? The Italian path to the Third Way can best be grasped by differentiating it from the British archetype.

The real origin of the British Third Way is 1981. The great historical fiasco of the SDP, the wrenching centrist split of the Labour Party that tanked at the polls and ultimately limped into irrelevance by merging with the Liberals, taught the ‘progressive bourgeoisie’ that it could not emancipate itself from the working-class politics of the trade-union Left without taking over and exploiting the organizational structures of the party of the working class.

In other words, what was necessary for the Center-Left was an entrist tactics, or, to put it more gracefully, a successful bid for cultural hegemony: only by denying to what was fast becoming a post-industrial underclass the ideological and electoral shelter of its own traditional mass party would the political equilibrium shift. By inducing this underclass effectively to exit the electoral market (just as it had been made redundant in the labor market) the necessary premise was reached for a shift of the general political balance to the Right, the cooptation of casual voters in the soft center, and a new overall hegemony — over a much smaller electoral pie. Electoral turnout plummeted 15% in Britain in the last twenty years of the 20th century, but the ‘median voter’ was reassured enough of the harmlessness of New Labour (freed of its underclass ballast) to return it to power for a record three terms. The Third Way is many things, but this basic socio-demographic mechanism of exclusion enabling a shift towards Washington-consensus-compatible economic policy is always at its core.

Such a strategy can pay off electorally, up to a point (the Right is hardly powerless to respond, especially since the fight takes place culturally on its home ground); but it cannot be forgotten that the leadership role of the ‘progressive bourgeoisie’ and its quest for a political strategy that was soft on conflict can also claim deep roots in a certain tradition of the British Labour movement going back at least as early as Fabianism.

Moving to Italy, two structural differences in its political history stand out. The first is that, while the Third Way in Britain was a path in a purely parliamentary and electoral political struggle, the perspective is radically different in countries through which the Iron Curtain ran — the front lines of the Cold War. There are many examples of attempts to find a Third Way out of the Cold War dualism in Italy, drawing inspiration from all manner of foreign experiences, beginning with Bandung and Yugoslavia, but all this took place within the context of a political system frozen by geopolitics. The second structural difference is that, since Italy was and is a semi-peripheral country in the world economy, capitalism quickly discovered it could not afford to govern there in its own name: as in many other Continental liberal democracies in the late 20th c., the main Right-wing party needed to outsource its vote collection to ideologies distinct from free market fundamentalism; in the case of post-war Italy, the vote-catcher was Christian Democracy.

That said, what of the Third Way in contemporary Italian politics?

The debate only comes to the fore after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and is made more interesting by the *Tangentopoli* scandals of the early ‘90s and the consequent implosion of the moderate socialist party (PSI), which would have been the natural beneficiary of this transformation.

So, the history of Third Way politics in Italy in the past quarter century has two moving parts. On the one hand, it’s the story of how the Italian Communist Party (PCI), the Leninist party Antonio Gramsci had contributed to found in the 1920s, eventually became the Democratic Party (PD), a Center-Left catch-all outfit patterned on its US namesake. This transformation was typically Third Way: the willing part of the old Left-wing electorate was shepherded towards objectively neoliberal positions, while subsequent modifications to the electoral laws ensured that the whole political space to its Left was organizationally cleansed. In this task, the Center-Left politicians could build on the sufficiently ambiguous precedent of ‘Eurocommunism,’ especially as concerns the political, legal, and military struggle against the extra-parliamentary Left in the latter half of the 1970s. The second moving part of the story is the triumph of Silvio Berlusconi on the ashes of the old DC. Berlusconi’s policies always were those of a populist: his *laissez-faire* liberalism, especially at the macroeconomic level, was simply a rhetorical pose to bolster his anticommunist credentials. This was so true in fact that at times Berlusconi was willing to contemplate heterodox measures such as deficit spending and challenges to the Brussels consensus, something his counterparts on the soft Left, with their petty bourgeois a-critical xenophilia and relentless quest for respectability at any cost, were never prepared to countenance.

In the interplay of these two factors, what Third Way politics in Italy lacked for twenty years was its most fundamental carot: electoral success and the attendant perquisites of office to distribute to the obedient and faithful. On the contrary, it was plagued by a succession of monumentally anti-charismatic leaders, from D’Alema to Rutelli to Veltroni, whom not even the well-paid magic of Third Way pollster-superstar Stan Greenberg could make palatable.[[1]](#footnote-1) When the Left did govern in these years, as with the Prodi cabinets of the late ‘90s and of 2006-08, it was to pick up the mess after the bash, an all-too-familiar paradigm of broom-and-dustbox Left summoned to sell ‘necessary sacrifices’ to its core constituencies, itself to be dismissed promptly once the markets appeased, so the merry populism-cum-insider-kickbacks could resume.

Therefore, the main ambiguity of Third Way politics in Italy up to 2013 was that –much as in France– it had become hegemonic only at the level of concrete policies, not as a coherent, freestanding ideological discourse. In terms of the privatization of public utilities, the labor market, the pension system, the defunding of public universities, the running of the national health service and so forth, actual opposition within legislative institutions had all but ceased on the part of the main Left-wing party. Yet, the socialism-inspired rhetoric was preserved: neoliberalism remained a dirty word and a vote-repellent on the Left.

This situation was modified by the ascendance of Matteo Renzi. His successful hostile takeover of the PD (and consequently the government) from the heirs of the PCI days provoked a clear change of rhythm. Renzi’s historical function, as Daniele Rielli correctly noted when he was but an up-and-coming Mayor of Florence,[[2]](#footnote-2) has been to dispel the ambiguity that allowed an essentially moderate, neoliberal party on the lukewarm Left to mobilize the symbolic and emotional potential of the Communist tradition in Italian politics. The Italian post-communist Left, after 25 years of soul-searching, could thus be a Third Way social-democratic party like everyone else. Therefore, it was even more ironic that, just as the party seemed finally to have found the man to lead it away from yellowed Berlinguer memories and onto the successful path of modernization and integration, the Third Way itself, as political paradigm on a global level, entered what increasingly looks like a death spiral.

Is the Third Way’s time up? It always was, even in its glory days, a politics for years of plenty: when social conflict flares up, it becomes noticeably less plausible to speak of ‘stakeholders.’ Faced with the contemporary struggle that really matters at an aggregate level, the subterranean but pervasive class conflict between the international plutocracy and the fiscal obligations of the welfare State, the Third Way was never likely to offer much beyond well-messaged regrets to the 99%. Hence it is not too surprising that all the great social-democratic parties of Europe are in crisis nowadays: Labour destroyed in its Scottish heartland, the German SPD ideologically colonized into playing dutiful junior-partner to Angela Merkel, the Spanish PSOE humiliated and outflanked, the Greek PASOK obliterated, the French PS drooping ever further in office as the FN tide mounts. All of them have been crushed by the progressive narrowing of the margins within which democratic/parliamentary debate on general options of macroeconomic policy has been constrained. It has become essentially impossible to remain respectable to the international financial markets while also offering a working class electorate something it would actually find worth voting for, beyond empty vindictiveness against immigrants and other marginals of all stripes. And the economic crisis has blown away many a fig leaf.

Seen from a medium-term perspective, the past quarter century has experienced a continuous centripetal shift in the Left anchor of the political spectrum, from communism to democratic socialism to Nordic social-democracy to flex-security and so forth, so that the room for maneuver of a Third Way has proportionately dwindled. The past few years, conversely, have witnessed the resurgence, both intellectual and electoral, of a Second Way, entirely alternative to neoliberal capitalism in its globalized form as evangelized today in Europe by the EU and its institutions. Italy has not yet seen the rise of a movement of this type, only a succession of more or less Right-wing populists vying for the earthly remains of Berlusconi’s electoral coalition, from Salvini’s Northern League 2.0 (now directly channeling the *Front National*, *Vlaams Belang*, or *Jobbik*) to Beppe Grillo’s fully-owned subsidiary 5-Star Movement. Hence, Renzi is currently looking a bit like a highlander, the last “mainstream” Center-Left politician in Europe to be at least passingly popular. All this, of course, till the next debt crisis. But as such a crisis is not, to say the least, mere academic speculation, it is instructive in closing to contemplate the case of the Greek Syriza.

The Third Way reaction to Syriza, like all other manifestations of Left-wing politics from Podemos to Corbyn to the resurgence of the Latin American Left, is the old Thatcherian TINA: There Is No Alternative. Indeed, if one wished to indulge in a modicum of psychoanalytical language, the Third Way could be defined as the introjection of the Right’s attacks of the 1980s, now turned on the Left by the Left itself, in the role of a sort of superego. And there is little doubt that the possibility of a politics, and specifically an economic politics, to the Left of the Washington consensus proving electorally successful would sound the death knell of the Third Way, which only ever sought a marriage of convenience with its Left-wing electorate — the sort of allegiance you get when the sole alternative you offer is complete marginalization.

It is worth speculating, though, that the comprehensive humiliation of Syriza at the European crisis negotiations this summer teaches a different lesson from TINA: it may simply be that in our post-crash world it is the traditional democratic-representative structure as a whole that, in its actually-existing form, has become completely incapable of mediating with whichever ‘Way’ –be it Second or Third– conflicts with market fundamentalism. In this post-crash world, it may be increasingly difficult to get not simply a Center-Left majority, but any majority whatsoever in favor of Washington-consensus-compatible policies, as traditional conservative forces everywhere face growing competition from rabid Right-wing populism. Political systems that not only have completely renounced fighting economic inequality, but that furthermore cannot promise jobs and growth at any point in the medium term in exchange for the sacrifices necessary here and now (and indefinitely into the future) to give the big creditors what they want are not systems that have a problem with alternative Left politics: they are systems that have a problem with democracy. The signs of strain accumulate, and the next crisis is hardly a million miles away. But if things stand thus, if democratic institutions have truly grown too brittle to handle this explosive mix, the political future of Italy, and of Europe, begins dangerously to resemble the 1930s.

1. http://www.nytimes.com/2000/10/30/world/italy-s-new-politics-the-beauty-contest.html [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. http://www.linkiesta.it/renzi-sinistra [↑](#footnote-ref-2)