

## **‘Neither Left nor Right’**

Crisis, Wane of Politics and Struggles for Sovereignty

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### **Introduction**

When I arrived for fieldwork in Rome, in early 2008, I was seeking to track and interview the ex- militants of the fascism-inspired ‘Spontaneista groups’. Active in the late 70s, these had been very violent and had claimed to be ‘neither left nor right’. Their name made reference to the supposed ‘spontaneity’ of their constitution and action, announcing an ideological predilection of instincts and drives over reason and thought. All of these movements had a short life of four to six years between the late 70s and the early 80s. I was then very surprised when – on my arrival in Rome – I ran into a crowd of students, dressed in black and with shaved heads, rallying against the reform of lower education and crying in the streets the slogan: *‘Non rossi, né neri, ma liberi pensieri’*.<sup>1</sup>

Proclaiming somewhat similar statements, the Italian Movimento 5 Stelle (5 Stars Movement), initiated by the public figure Beppe Grillo and the internet consultant Gianroberto Casaleggio, has collected an increasing amount of votes, up to the point it has recently become Italy’s second largest party. Grillo, who previously had a successful career as a political satirist, was known for his polemics against the entire political establishment but – in a country in which any criticism of power has almost always come from the left – his critiques were also relegated to that

side of the political spectrum. This perception changed when Grillo's Vaffanculo-Day, 8 September 2007,<sup>2</sup> collected around 1 million Italians protesting against corruption, moral decay, and tax evasions of Italian politicians from left and right. Grillo has recently been able to gain strong electoral momentum by pumping up the volume of his accusations and extending his attack to the European Union's politics and institutions, making statements against illegal immigrants and claiming that 'popular sovereignty' has been stolen from the people by the politicians.

Also recently, the so-called 'Rakes Movement' has raised claims even more angrily against – generally – any institutional target. Once again, the EU, the government and 'the politicians' from the left and the right were under attack. It started as a spontaneously gathered group of 'desperate farmers, petty entrepreneurs, artisans: an impoverished middle class, held together by the only common denominator of not being able to "take it [the crisis] any more"' (Marco Revelli, *Il Manifesto*, 12.12.13). One spokesman of this group claimed that '... the Agency of Revenue has to be closed, high finance forbidden, the Euro erased'. Moreover, they asked 'for the Government to fall, and [for] all of the public institutions to be disbanded: the Parliament, the President of the Republic, and every other institution all along' (cit. in Gigante, *Il Giornale*, 10.12.2013).

All of these recent spontaneous claims sound significantly similar to formulations I encountered while studying the Spontaneista groups of the 70s. Stretching analysis a bit further, the constitution of similar ideological forms seems to have appeared even before on the European public arena. This was at the dawn of the last century, with the ensemble of anti-materialist intellectuals that Sternhell has described as the 'generation of 1890' (1997: ix–lxxx): Gustave Le Bon, Pareto, Mosca and Sorel all participated in the constitution of an intellectual debate, a part of which eventually concretized politically in the Fascist regime.

A common feature of these historically diverse experiences is the recurrent anti-rationalist element of the discourse: a primacy of action and

instinct that is constantly reasserted over reason and thought. The latter oppositional dichotomy is generally part of a larger critical discourse about the state, seen as a promoter of institutional rationality, which is considered to be bad. Specifically, the praise of unrational forces is used to sustain the idea that the political articulation of diverse social interests into left/right alignments is nothing but a spurious rationalistic mystification. In this view, institutional blocks identifying with left or right ideologies would only be superficial distinctions disguising the fact that there is only *one* interest: the concern of the political class (working together as a social class) for its self-preservation, and the conservation of its own privileges. Thus, one should reject all of the declinations of politics provided by instituted politicians and situate oneself 'beyond left and right'.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, and as a consequence of what is stated above, the practitioners of this 'post-ideological turn' often end up claiming to represent the voice of 'the people' against a corrupted and globalized political establishment that is not aware anymore of what happens underneath its cosmopolitan stratosphere (Friedman 2003; Mouffe 2005; Kalb 2011). What are, then, the social and political conditions in which these ideological formations tend to emerge, take direction and shape? Is there a specific set of structural variations that we can possibly identify across time, and relate to the emergence of these specific discourses? One common feature stands out quite clearly if we look at the historical circumstances in which those groups and discourses emerged: they all happened in a time of significant crisis and transformation of the established left.

If the beginning of last century was the period marked by the decline of the hopes Marxism had raised in the late nineteenth century, the late 70s are characterized in a similar way by the hopes the Italian Communist Party (PCI hereafter) had fomented. But when in 1976 the PCI eventually managed to accede to the governmental arena by supporting a Christian Democrat<sup>4</sup> Cabinet, the expectations of a positive transformation were left without answer. Less than one year after, it was the beginning of the so called 'movement of 1977', when spontaneously constituted groups and

movements started a radical contestation of the whole political system, making little distinction between left and right. Even if we look at the emergence of more recently constituted political formations like Movimento 5 Stelle, or the Blocco Studentesco, we will notice how they all established themselves as relevant political phenomena between 2007 and 2008, just when the second left-wing government of the last forty years was turning out to be completely disappointing, once again, with regards to the expectations it had raised. It would thus appear that some kind of structural relation binds the crisis of the left to the emergence of political reactions that claim to be ‘post-ideological’. But –we should ask – what are the under-pinnings of this failure, and how does the latter come to transform the logics and mechanisms of ideological production within a given political arena?

The following chapter aims to focus on the historical experience of the ‘Spontaneista’ groups I studied in Rome, and attempts to isolate generalizable features that could help us understand the constitutive logics of movements that claim to be ‘neither left nor right’. I will try to show how fundamental transformations in the composition of the labour force and class structure in Italy per-versely interacted with changes in the instituted political sphere and in the mechanisms of political representation, in ways that dramatically changed the reproduction of ideologies within the social space. More specifically, I will show how the overgrowth of a post-industrial middle class corresponded to a process of alienation/marginalization of other subjects and groups in the public sphere.

Somehow similarly to what Lazar has indicated (this volume), I will use Chantal Mouffe’s work to show how the removal of class from the political world operated by ‘Third Way’ postulations tends to be answered by grassroots feelings of outrage and indignation. It is perhaps not by chance that – in these two cases – these mobilizations are qualified as ‘spontaneous’. The redrafting of social mobilizations as ‘spontaneous’ seems to rechannel frictions and tensions that emerged in the midst of conflicting class interests into a morally defined frame, and to ‘naturalize’

them. Here, nature is resur-gent against culture and reason, since the crisis of class politics is also the crisis of the rationalities that animated its emergence, late in the nineteenth century.

Overall, I will try to show how the decline of the left and the rise of ‘Third Way’ politics tends to transform political idioms into moral ones, thereby eroding the egalitarian presuppositions of political representation, and reorganizing the ways in which difference is reproduced in the political arena.

### **‘The Limits of Growth’: Austerity, Clientelism and the Transfer of Economic Distress to the Political Realm**

If the two years of 1968 and 1969 had inaugurated – as it is known – one of the longest lasting and most violent and powerful mobilization cycles in the whole of the West, the oil crisis of 1973 would have hit even harder and imposed a structural, irreversible change to the functioning logics of the Italian political system as a whole. Only a few years before, in 1969, man had set foot on the moon, moulding an imagination of expansion of mankind into the universe, which seemed to have no limits. In 1973 the oil crisis would suddenly show a shockingly different reality. Italy’s situation was, by the way, worse than anywhere else in Europe, since as other countries had already implemented restrictive economic policies, Italy was then trying to sustain production and growth with inflation and devaluation of its currency (Tarrow 1979; Crainz 2003: 438–39). In this situation, the combined impact of further inflation and general economic stagnation was meant to be devastating.

Austerity was only the immediate issue of this conjuncture. Class conflict was – quite obviously – another immediate one, although it unfolded in ways, as we shall see, that ended up eroding the ‘class’ part of it. A deeper and more structured way to look at it, however, is to pay attention to changes that were occurring in class structure. More precisely, with an observer of the day, I would point at the articulation between the

transformations of the labour force in Italy and the paralysis of the political class as the epicentre of the Italian crisis (Foa 1976: 259–60).

As it is known, after the constitution of early industrial centres in the late nineteenth century, production in Italy nearly did not evolve until the aftermath of World War II. Then, the reopening of global markets, the demand of goods for the postwar reconstruction all over Europe and the European Recovery Plan sponsored by the United States ignited a vertiginous growth that transformed a substantially underdeveloped country into one of the industrial powers of the late twentieth century. This sudden expansion, however, did come at a price. Between the 1950s and the 1970s, a large majority of the labour force was transferred from agricultural to industrial production, undergoing a significant urban drift, and sustaining massive migration flows, both internal and external to the country. On one hand, these processes produced a massive reservoir of cheap labour, the winning factor of the industrial boom. On the other hand, this also created – through processes that seem similar to the Marxian primitive accumulation – pockets of uprooted and alienated populations, whose presence would help the capitalist classes to keep competition high and labour force costs low. The divisions between the established class of specialised workers and the new army of cheap, uprooted, unqualified workers produced the marginalization of the latter, especially in small-medium towns (Barbarano 1979: 188).

Simultaneously, the 60s and 70s saw the emergence and consolidation of a so-called ‘middle class’ (Sylos Labini 1974), based on the upward social mobility that ‘the miracle’ had sustained and on the progressive tertiarization of the economy. Part of this process was politically driven. As noted by Filippo Barbarano, municipal policies allowed the formation of a middle class of self-employed small retailers and shopkeepers, by the generous concession of licences, de-taxation and economic incentives. Abundant were – also at the municipal level – the policies successfully triggering petty real estate rent and the formation of rentier classes (Cervellati 1976).

Lastly, a number of observers have described the formation (and later overgrowth) of an unproductive middle class, whose employment in the public sector was generally driven by clientelistic logics of preservation of the block of power and of the social peace, rather than by actual administrative needs (Barbarano 1979: 190; Lanaro 1992: 340; Pizzorno 1997: 307). This was a politics that exploded throughout the 70s, partly as a means of the Christian Democratic Party to control social conflict and preserve its electoral basis. As noted by Donolo, ‘the mediation within [different segments of] its own constituency became one of the main activities [of the Christian Democratic Party] and progressively sabotaged the capability of the whole political system to take governmental decisions’ (1977: 11–12).

This overgrowing political/administrative personnel (Crainz 2003: 420) started to function as a social class in its own right, and reproduced itself thanks to the power to ‘control the distribution of public funding, decide appointments, entrust enterprises with contracts, and strengthen clienteles’ (Pizzorno 1997: 307). Especially this last segment of the emerging Italian middle class will play a major role materially, and most of all symbolically, in the fractures within which the conflicts, disputes and struggles that are the subject of this chapter eventually unfolded. The emergence of a class of privileged public servants, seen as the product of political clientelism and benefiting from the latter, could do nothing but raise anger during years in which economic certainties were disintegrating and a future of progress suddenly seemed to disappear to the many. In this context, the traditional sociological frame of working classes and bourgeoisie appeared to start giving way to new dichotomies. The expanding domain of the precarious workers, unemployed youth, dropouts and students, who could not see a professional future coming, was developing the feeling not to be represented any more by the political class, and they were harbouring their indignation at the margins of the political arena.

### **Parricide in the ‘Old Left’**

In 1977, turmoil in Italy was higher than ever because of a cycle of social mobilizations, which started in 1968 and would not stop (Tarrow 1989; Ferraresi 1996; Sommier 2008; Ventrone 2012). Particularly, as indicated before, tensions multiplied within the left as the Communist Party almost won the general elections of 1976, ending up with the endorsement of a Christian Democrat Government. PCI had never been even close to governmental power, and the actual need for its votes to support the DC cabinet was regarded as a great occasion for the left to eventually start wielding a positive influence over the administration of the country. The reformist attitude of the PCI had been raising hopes that – eventually – even the interests of the lower classes could be represented. Unfortunately, the government proved unable to create the radical inversion of a trend many had hoped for. On the contrary, it ended up ‘burying the hopes of transformation, and making clear that the country could not go back from the ongoing process of degeneration and decline of public enterprise’ (Crainz 2003: 545).

Within this context, a symbolic and devastating rupture within the left was produced by the events of La Sapienza – the main uni-versity of Rome – on 17 February 1977. There, the general secretary of Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro (CGIL), the major general union, which was endorsed by the Communist Party, was chased away by leftist militants after a long scuffle with the security service of the union and PCI. As reported by one witness, a ‘parricide was almost materially consumed when the general secretary of CGIL union Luciano Lama – one of the most powerful figures of the working-class movement – got expelled from the University of Rome. Just a few months before, this would have been an almost unimaginable act: something that was breaking into pieces all of the taboos and credos of working class mythology’ (Annunziata 2007: 4).

The episode itself was bound to change the historicity of the Italian 70s: an ‘event’ – as defined by Alban Bensa and Eric Fassin (2002) – representing a ‘rupture in intelligibility’, changing the principles through which reality is interpreted and understood in the everyday. This



foundational rupture was probably creating an irre-versible split between the developmentalist and institutional left embodied by PCI – on the one side – and what started then to be known as ‘the movements’ (note the plural): grassroots, anti-institutional and often culturalist formations on the extreme left.<sup>5</sup>

The fragmented scene that emerged from the latter breakup was based on the original divide between those who thought they could sustain a project of social reformation, and those who had lost that belief and aimed at transformation by a radical rupture with the present. Within this context, the idea of an armed struggle, which would trigger a revolutionary process, gained legitimacy in the later part of the decade, and some of the militants of the aforementioned groups ended up joining armed organizations like the Brigate Rosse (Red Brigades) and – later on – Nuclei Armati Proletari (NAP – Proletarian Armed Squads) or Prima Linea (Front Line).

While it is clear that the ‘Lama episode’ was the historical epicentre that changed the historicity and the logics of political reproduction of the Italian left, it may be less obvious that the latter ‘rupture’ within the left was crucial also in generating powerful ideological transformations of the extreme right in the following years. It was after that ‘event’ that many political actors, historically rooted within either left or right social spheres, started questioning the ‘left/right’ horizontal configuration of the political spectrum. As an alternative, the political space was reconfigured through the vertical opposition between those who identified with the institutional order and those who did not.

It could also be argued that the emergence of the Italian ‘New Right’ has often been poorly understood because left-wing academics were reluctant, out of ‘moral’ prejudice, to connect it directly to the crisis of the old left. To our spatially organized minds, left and right are radically distant phenomena, and – in a very Douglasian way – we are not keen to accept any kind of mutual contamination (Loperfido 2013). Yet, there is abundant evidence. One of my former Spontaneista informants, Biagio Cacciolla, has been a central figure in the effort of younger generations of the right to

claim a direct connection between the ‘Lama episode’ and the new course of their ideology. As a matter of fact, he has gotten as far as claiming to have been an active party in the confrontations between the leftist movements and the security service of the PCI/CGIL.

The presence of extreme right militants on 17 February 1977 was never confirmed, but what is interesting is the will of a young right-wing leader to identify with a major turnaround moment of the left, and – also – to rhetorically mark that moment as a point of genesis, the beginning of a new way of being a right-winger.

In May 1977, I gave an interview to the newspaper L’Espresso, where I was alluding to the fact that I – all together with other people from the Fronte Universitario d’Azione Nazionale (FUAN) – had been taking part in the riots against Lama, at La Sapienza, Rome ... In that interview, I was explaining how the ideology of the movement of 1977 was much more a product of our own [right wing] world view, than of the leftists’. The next day, our party branch had become a pole of attraction for right wing militants all over Rome and Italy. Now, one must acknowledge that we were dynamic and creative: we were curious about Pasolini, we were eating macrobiotic we were looking with interest at the artistic underground currents ... and we were making ourselves known! ... As soon as I went to the central MSI<sup>6</sup> committee, people were mad at me: ‘for Christ sake, Biagio, the press is talking more about you than about the party secretary!’ (Biagio Cacciolla cited in Rao 2009: 138–39)

Several themes that were consolidating within the left movements in those years are prominent here as well: curiosity towards ‘heretical figures’ of the left, interest in countercultures, attention to nature and food cultures coming from the East and – most of all – a sort of antagonism between the actors of grassroots politics and correspondent established political actors.

Later on in 1977, some militants of FUAN also appropriated the ‘foundational breakup’ of the left and constituted an alternative genealogy in which the ‘Lama episode’ was inspired by an earlier one, which had happened about a decade before within the right-wing circle.

One day, in Piazza del Popolo, somebody wrote a sentence on a wall, which became the symbol of that season of ours: Caradonna, 1968, Lama 1977. FUAN was the signature, followed by a Celtic cross. (Biagio Cacciolla cited in Rao, 2009: 139)

The name of Giulio Caradonna is known thanks to this episode. In 1968, some of the students from the extreme right had decided – against the advice of MSI – to take part in the universities’ occupation all together with students of the left. On 16 March, Giulio Caradonna was the MP of MSI to lead hundreds of neo-fascist batterers in a gigantic brawl with students, which would force younger occupants from left and right to leave the premises of the university. For Cacciolla and his associates, this episode would constitute an antecedent to the ‘Lama event’. Here – once again – the distinctions between left and right were obscured in favour of a stronger opposition between grassroots movements and instituted political powers.

Another informant explicitly told me about ‘a generational accord for the struggle against the system’, and then brought up again their own little ‘Lama episode’:

Many started accusing the MSI of being unable to handle [the situation] any longer ... I don’t remember precisely ... it was after Acca Larentia,<sup>7</sup> or after another one of those violent deaths [of our militants]. We all went to the party [MSI] headquarters via Alessandria, and we basically smashed up ... we destroyed the party branch beating the crap out of people there, understand?! Because they clearly couldn’t protect us any more ... I mean, I was troubled myself [by what we did], it felt unfair, but on the other hand ...you had to unleash your anger against somebody, and – politically speaking– those people were our fathers, after all, they were responsible for us and to us ... so to whom are you going to turn to? ... I mean: our family was destroyed ... this is important: because our family, to us, were the [neo-fascist] comrades, the camaraderie ... (P., interview, 2010)

In all of those cases, disintegrating patterns of internal solidarity within established ideological universes seem to trigger a rather violent process of fragmentation of larger factions into smaller political segments, and to generate conflict among those. A general feature of this conflict was the breakdown of authority structures within political fields, and the subsequent transformation of internal logics of political opposition. Quite

suddenly, ideological dispute ceased being monopolized by the conflict between traditional political opponents, which followed the horizontal scheme of confrontation 'left vs. right'. Instead, smaller and culturally defined units started to proclaim their autonomy from their established institutional representatives, on the basis of having a radically different relationship to 'lived reality'. To their minds, established political actors were living in a different world of privileges and were no longer able to protect or represent instances from lower social orders. Old friends became new adversaries, following a vertical axis of internal opposition between 'grassroots' and 'established' political actors of the same faction.

### **Spontaneismo and the Uncanny Effects of Fragmentation**

This transition from horizontal to vertical oppositions points us to the right direction in understanding larger and more general transformations that were probably underlying the 'post-ideological' turn of grassroots radical movements. The breakdown of structures of authority within the left was directly connected to the crisis of its project: after a decade of economic regression and stagnation, 'progress' and 'developmentalism' had become increasingly difficult to sustain as the underpinnings of a political enterprise. With the growth of inequalities and social exclusion, 'social justice' was also on the wane, while the aftermath of elections in 1976 had made it clear to everyone that the participation of PCI in governmental action would wield no positive influence whatsoever. In other words, it appeared to many that the lobbies and established political elite were taking control and mitigating the influence of the left, rather than the reverse.

Just a few years earlier, Pasolini's metaphor of 'Il Palazzo' (the palace), describing the self-referentiality and inaccessibility of the corridors of power, had started to gain enormous success every-where outside those corridors. But when the crisis of the left became evident, or – more precisely – when it became evident that the left was being integrated within the logics of vertical power, rather than the contrary, the arrogance of the

political class was laid bare, and allowed to continue unchallenged. Grassroots militants from left and right began to feel betrayed by their institutional representatives – as we have seen – and engaged in internal conflict. The result was a widespread fragmentation of political organizations with the proliferation of grassroots movements, generally prone to violence, and opposed to both left and right established actors.

The constitution of Spontaneismo, and its ‘neither left nor right’ attitude, seems to be a sub-product of this process of rearticulation of the logics of political reproduction within the Italian system. The slow disintegration of ties of political solidarity within party organizations called for new formations, new alliances and new ideological postulations. The main groups within the Spontaneista galaxy were Costruiamo l’Azione (CLA),<sup>8</sup> founded in 1978, Nuclei Armati Rivoluzionari (NAR)<sup>9</sup>, founded in 1979, and Terza Posizione (TP),<sup>10</sup> also founded in 1979. All three were animated in their political passions by a strong, unmediated refusal of the political system as a whole and, at the same time, by the desire for an alliance with the extreme left, in order to fight together the political elite. In 1978, for example, Costruiamo l’Azione group declared on its fanzine:

We recognise our former mistakes and we are saying to leftists: wake up boys! Don’t let them fuck you again, haven’t you been the trained monkeys of the state for long enough? ... *Our enemies are the same and they all gang up against us, let’s fight the filthy shit-hole together!* (Anonymous, Costruiamo l’Azione, April 1978, n. I, p. 1, my emphasis)

While offering alliances to the radicals, young Spontaneista militants appeared disappointed by the ‘betrayal’ of the institutional left:

Only dull minded people would not realize, at this point, that the left-wing front ... is substantially siding with the [instituted party] system, since they have fully become a part of it. (Costruiamo l’Azione, April 1978, n. I, p. 3)

Third Position, on the other hand, indicated by its own name the will to overcome the distinctions between left and right, in favour of a total

identification with 'the people', of which they claimed to be the only authentic representative.

Of all three groups, NAR was the more radical, and somehow a little different. It had consolidated as a group around the leadership of Valerio Fioravanti, who was considered the 'military leader' of the Spontaneista circle. They were all about violence and launched their 'political career' with the cold-blooded killing of a number of leftist militants, among other innocent people. Nevertheless, in a second strand of their campaign of terror, their targets seemed to change. Policemen and judges were killed, to demonstrate that the state was the enemy they were going for. Fioravanti himself started to preach for putting aside the struggle against leftists, who were fighting the same enemy, and thus had become potential allies.

Next to these more established groups, the neo-fascist circle, however small in numbers, exploded in the late 70s into a nebula of small organizations, micro communities and temporary cells. All of these were a real expression of the process of fragmentation by which non-established groups multiplied and engaged in an intense activity of boundary-making and endo-social practices. Especially the more violent groups renounced any kind of unnecessary relationship to the exterior, wanting to hang around only with the members of the in-group. But also more peaceful experiences like the *Comunità Organiche di Popolo* (People's Organic Communities), in which some Spontaneista got involved, were basically self-referential and represented a trend of disinvolvement from larger segments of social life.

This breakaway from society and sociality seems to have represented for my informants – at least initially – a certain degree of satisfaction and security in a world in which difference was becoming threatening. In this sense, this general fragmentation of political identities implied also a fragmentation of space: the Spontaneista had a very clear map of the Roman neighbourhoods where they could circulate safely as opposed to those controlled by 'enemies' or members of rival groups, where right-wingers, or even just people who looked like them, would run a serious

risk of being beaten or shot. This was, of course, also true in reverse: the Spontaneista killed several young militants of the left, just because they had been spotted circulating in a right-wing controlled neighbourhood.

Political struggle, at that stage, was no longer considered to be about enacting a left- or right-wing social project by taking control of administrative institutions. The declared goal was to fight the institutional order itself, or, at least, to escape its gravitational field: its norms, rules and impositions.

### **From ‘Class for Itself’ to ‘Class in Itself’: Vertical Reproduction of Power, and the Rise of Violence**

All of these groups were – in fact – denouncing a general verticalization of the ways in which power was practised and exercised in the society of their day. But, curiously, their refusal to identify with traditional ideological distinctions such as ‘left and right’ appeared to reflect trends of political convergence among instituted parties. Parties engaged in numerous trans-ideological alliances even though they did not always explicitly seek to overcome existing differences between left and right. The so called ‘Governo di Unità Nazionale’,<sup>11</sup> the ‘Compromesso Storico’<sup>12</sup> between DC and PCI, the ‘Arco Costituzionale’ against extremism,<sup>13</sup> all represented – to the eyes of my informants – political embodiments of this trans-ideological tendency of the established elite. These were all publicly justified by the need to federate against violence, where ‘violence’ usually meant the Spontaneista people, or radical groups from the left. If it is true that these groups were often actually violent, one must also acknowledge that their criticism of political power struck sometimes quite close to the truth.

According to a plurality of accounts (Asor Rosa 1977; Lanaro 1992; Crainz 2003), the mechanisms of political representation were in fact substantially eroded already in late 70s Italy: the once different segments of political society had been assimilated into one another and categories

like left and right were becoming increasingly irrelevant. As two observers had already noted in 1974, it had become very difficult 'to distinguish a Social Democrat from a Christian Democrat, a Communist from a Socialist, and even certain given Liberals from certain weakened Marxists' (Scalfari and Turani 1974: 9).

Chantal Mouffe (2005) has analysed a similar kind of transition in relation to much more recent times. Mouffe indicates that a movement towards 'a post-adversarial' mode of politics has been supported not only by the political convergence (and sometimes alliance) of the institutional left and right, but also by academic banner-men of the 'Third Way' like Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck. The result is the 'incapacity of traditional parties to provide distinctive forms of identification around possible alternatives' (Mouffe: 2005: 55, but see also Žižek 2000).

The convergence of the political antagonisms towards an undifferentiated centre had an unforeseen consequence – that is, the progressive exclusion (and successive alienation) of those 'marginals' of the political system that were once included in a much more far-reaching mechanism of political representation. This was actually deliberate in the Italian 70s, where this kind of rearrangement even had a name. 'Opposti Estremismi' (opposed extremisms) was known as the logic according to which the more violent and radical the extreme, non-institutionalized wings of the political arena, the more likely the forces occupying the institutional centre would be to keep their electoral basis and to consolidate their interests and privileges by reassuring a frightened middle class.<sup>14</sup>

This seems to be the context in which 'neither left nor right' ideas and ideologies find meaningfulness and political momentum. They, in fact, bypass the trap of opposed extremisms by declaring the dichotomy 'right/left' obsolete and channelling the emotionality of their critique against the political establishment as a whole. They establish themselves in the political arena – quite paradoxically, one could say – as responses to the uniformization of political and social differences between the



established left and right. Their aim is to collect the support of those left out by the shrinking mechanism of representation. These groups claim to represent a 'post-ideological' form of politics that is curiously similar to the political convergence of the parties they contest. Nevertheless, if the former promote a 'post adversarial' ideal, the latter rearticulate conflict and heated forms of political opposition as their basic operational modes.

As Italy shows, this particular realignment of power is not new in itself and tends to appear in socially and historically situated circumstances. Looking at these would allow us to make the connection with particular social and economic transformations that might be involved in the formation to these political epiphenomena. In this regard, what Mouffe fails to grasp – while focusing only on the political level – is that there are social processes of class transformation underlying the political transition to the 'post-ideological mode'; I believe the early case of Italy helps us make these processes more visible.

Again in one of the 'Costruiamo l'Azione' mimeographs, we can read: 'The masters Agnelli and Berlinguer, along with their servants, are plotting together to criminalize every substantial opposition' (Anonymous, *Costruiamo l'Azione*, April 1978, n. I, p. 1). Identified with 'the masters' here, are Berlinguer, the general secretary of the PCI, and Agnelli, the owner of Fiat (the biggest industry in the country), and later president of the Confederation of Industrialists. It is important to note that the quote is not simply a denunciation of the connivance between people that are meant to represent left and the right. In that case, Andreotti (then the Christian Democrat Prime Minister backed by the Communist Party), and not Agnelli, would be standing together with Berlinguer. The condemnation of an alliance between the major industrialist of the country and the secretary of the major 'working class party' decries, in fact, a relevant transformation of class interests. These are articulated through political positionalities that were once (but are clearly not any longer) considered to be the expression of solidarities internal to, and consistent with, class structure. But to denounce the betrayal of these internal solidarities is also to renounce them. The latter

mechanism seems, thus, to implicate the dis- integration and dis-articulation of the internal sodalities of class, at least at the representational level. It is a process that opens up symbolic room and opportunities for the formation of inter- class and intra-class alliances at the political level, ending up with the quite likely formation of class, subclass and intra-class new clusterings.

In relation to the Italian case, Scalfari and Turani have noted how – in those years – a commonality of interests between the ruling elite and the liberal bourgeoisie had created a ‘new class’ that they termed ‘state bourgeoisie’. Massimo Paci gave a sociologically detailed description of these new social formations:

The industrial bourgeoisie has attended the emergence of a new ‘financial bourgeoisie’, with which it has only partially integrated. On the other hand, the latter has engaged in a rather tight partnership – in terms of speculative business – with the governmental political class, this one itself appearing to have recently become a social class on its own terms. (Paci 1996: 701)

The obvious outcome of these processes of change is what Strathern has described as a disintegration of the class paradigm, understood here as the framework of social meaning upon which our socially situated ‘point of view’ rests (Strathern 1992: 142). Wolf has shown – in a powerful exploration of the relationships between power and meaning – how a new social axiom (or ‘framework of meaning’, in Strathern’s terms) enters into conflict with an old one and thereby it also challenges ‘the fundamental categories that empower its dynamics’ (Wolf 1990: 593). In this sense, a ‘logico-aesthetic [dis]-integration’ of the categorical order is likely to mirror the dis-integration of class sodalities, and change the nature and subject of more general discourses that animate social life.

In Italy, for example, reference to the ‘working class’, common during the 70s, seems to have progressively disappeared, not only from the discourse of its traditional adversaries, but also – Guido Crainz notes (2003: 563) – from the narratives of the political left itself. More radical groups, especially the ones derived from the experience of Operaismo

(workerism, see above), had somehow tried to resist this tendency. They were, in fact, attempting to formulate a more inclusive idea of 'working class', where unemployed people, students, housewives and off the books labour were also seen as its constitutive elements. However, the breakdown of authority structures within the internal cosmos of the left (with the explosion of competition between different segments of the latter and, more generally, the opposition between instituted and grass-roots formations) appeared to impede the transmission of instances that had emerged 'below' to the upper – instituted – block. At the same time, even within the extreme left, competition was high, and political positioning very diverse. Fringes of the radical groups decided on armed struggle, whereas other fringes, like the afore-mentioned 'creative wing',<sup>15</sup> were rechanneling the expression of their dissent into artistic performances and lifestyles. In this confused situation, when the radical left tried to federate and challenge PCI hegemony at the institutional level by taking part in the 1976 elections as a political party, it was faced with disastrous electoral results. Despite the enduring success of the theoretical tools that the workerist experience had produced, what was left of it as its off-spring of political formations came, there at an end (Filippini 2011). Class struggle seemed about to be won, but not by those who had initiated it in their attempt to establish welfare rights and social justice for 'the people'.

The category of 'the people' was largely present in public discourses of the 70s, but nowadays is nowhere to be found, claims the French journalist Eric Conan. Not only in politics, but also when it comes to art, literature and cinema, the 'working class', once almost over-represented as a subject, has today basically disappeared (Conan 2004). Others have noted how 'the cultural and political removal of working classes [from public debates] has permitted to establish the image of a pacified society, hegemonized by the middle class and fully consensual. The invisibility of the working class evacuates the very idea of conflict' (Guilluy 2010: 9).

'Conflict' is then brought back into the public sphere by the fury of 'neither left nor right' ideologists, with an animosity that one of the editors

of this collection has previously labelled – quoting Slavoj Žižek – as ‘the return of the repressed’. ‘Class’ is, of course, the repressed:|

The workings, effects, exploitations and humiliations of class are the repressed and denied but never forgotten trauma that expresses itself in neo-nationalist populism, as the wider public culture of neoliberal growth, gentrification, and cosmopolitan class formation denies its denizens the availability of the language of class. (Kalb 2011: 14)

The latter process is also evident in the ethnographic record I was able to collect in the field. ‘C.’ – for example – was one of the more active Spontaneistas in the late 70s, one of those who drove the whole scene into a spiral of violence. In the effort of spelling out his life history, he shows how the transformations of a world that is no longer organized around a class-based paradigm triggered a significant rearticulation of the principles through which a life is planned, thought of and lived through. This seems to be true even for somebody like him, who clearly did not sit on the left side of the political arena at that time.

the divide started between those who still believed in ‘the future of labour’, and those who had begun to refuse this view. Among people of my age there was a kind of opposition: ... some believed that our society would have been functioning well in any case, and thus they aimed at finding a girl, getting married as soon as they could, and creating a family. Some others believed they could look at things in a different way ... On the one side, people felt free to do whatever they liked, or at least they knew they had just to follow their own interests; whereas, on the other side, people were still expecting things to always follow the same scheme, because ‘it is like that, it’s always been, and so it will be forever’. (C., interview)

The inability to identify with a future based on the expansion of labour seems to be pushing life structures into new shapes and organizational principles. C.’s description of a dichotomized social life, based on generational difference, only confirms the fact that these variations are the expression of a change in the logics of social and political reproduction of the system. The class paradigm not only disappears from the discourse of the younger ones, but is basically rejected by them, despite the fact that

they appear as the very victims of its dissolution. The predicament of the younger generations becomes ‘to follow one’s own interests’– that is, to engage in a process of individualization of interests, which they refuse to frame in a class paradigm.

In this sense, the violence produced by Spontaneista groups (as well as radicals on the left) can be understood as the ‘class conflict’ minus the class paradigm: an aggressiveness, in Freudian terms, which could no longer be expressed in an organized manner.

## **Conclusions**

The overgrowth of a post-industrial middle class coupled with the progressive dis-integration of the remnants of the industrial working class seems to have encouraged a process of dichotomization of social/political identifications. Here the principal distinction is no longer related to one’s position within the worlds of labour, but simply to having or not a stable occupation, and thus ‘before being above or below in the social hierarchy, one is included or excluded’ (Sue 1994: 219).

The political rearticulation of these processes of social transformation is one that claims to be not only a-political, but anti-political. Spontaneista movements claimed to represent the end of ideologies and to have buried politics. As our informant once mentioned to me, ‘the goal [of political conflict] is no longer to get a higher salary, or to be integrated into a higher system of privileges, but is an affirmation of identity, ... while at the same time representing a rupture with the social structure in its totality’ (C. interview, 15).

Identity, and the expression of the self, often interpreted as the enactment of a lifestyle, a form of behaviour, a praxis, seem to over-rule class as a social paradigm. As Holmes (2000) has shown, style can become an aestheticized basis of solidarity in the wake of the dis-integration of larger axioms of social

behaviour. In this sense, I hope I was able to show how the proliferation of 'styles' as markers of difference is directly related to the verticalization of power and its logics of reproduction. They are, of course, expressions of 'a fierce antagonism toward the respectable "settled" society amid which [their practitioners] live as persecuted aliens' (Herbert 1991: 249), but are also a source of satisfaction produced by the reintegration of impaired and alienated subjects into larger fields of belonging.

The sociologist Marco Revelli also seems to see the verticalization of politics as the origin of the 'neither left nor right' politics of the 'Rakes Movement':

politics are banned from the order of the discourse. Too deep is the abyss that has representatives and represented, between the language spoken 'above' and the vernacular spoken 'below'. Too vulgar has been the exodus of the left, of the entire left, from the spaces of life. (Marco Revelli, *Il Manifesto*, 12.12.2013)

In a political universe in which lower segments of society do not feel represented anywhere by those who are in power, class does not fit any longer as the social-organizational paradigm through which sovereignty can be practised and articulated into politics. One could note – en passant – how the slow disappearance of class as a relevant political category has weirdly corresponded to the progressive expansion of a discourse on 'civility'. Since the 80s, the growing categorical hegemony of notions like 'the civil society', 'civil' or 'human' rights seems to include implicit references to what is considered 'not' to be so. Once again, similar processes were happening during the Italian 70s as well: the established society defined itself more and more in opposition to an expanding domain of alienated outsiders. Even one of the leaders of the Italian Communist Party (PCI), for example, stated in 1974 that 'out of the party system, within the actual social reality of our country, there's nothing but authoritarianism and dictatorship' (Cossutta 1974: 107).

Asor Rosa (1977) foresaw the descent of these processes into essentialized political categories, thereby establishing the representation of

politically situated alternatives as the expression of voices of ‘two different societies’. In this view, the ‘two societies’ look at each other as alien entities, each threatening to disintegrate the other, in order to satisfy its own needs. On the one hand, the established society of warranted people recategorizes its own drop-outs and outsiders as dangerous criminals, uncivil or undemocratic. On the other hand, the outsiders tend to federate while reappropriating the category of ‘the people’ as a unifying symbol capable of overcoming the old distinctions between left and right. As in the opposite case, this also happens via a moral essentialization of the ‘other’ against which the unwarranted society defines itself: the established society (Asor Rosa 1977: 63–68).

In this frame, the progressive renunciation of the possibility of playing an adversarial conception of politics organized around class lines seems to force changing structures of sociality into a polarized mode of behaviour where social conflict and negotiation among peers are repressed by means of moral classification of the adversary. This leads to a paralysis of the ‘adversarial model of politics’ through which sovereignty is usually negotiated and expressed in democratic systems (Mouffe 2005).

While generally subscribing to Mouffe’s analysis, I have tried to make an argument against an understanding of these changes as simply political. The Italian case shows how processes of social verticalization are not separable from these political transformations. What we saw in Italy in the 70s (and I believe we increasingly see in the present day) is a process of disintegration of life structures in which impaired subjects search for security while trying to integrate themselves into collectivities that, not relying on class any longer, can only define themselves in aesthetic/cultural terms.

To sum up, the crisis of the left in the Italian 70s triggered a process of redefinition of the mechanisms of social reproduction in the entire political system. Specifically, the left’s failure to represent instances from lower segments of the social ladder opened up space for a verticalization of society

in which instituted powers found themselves no longer in need of legitimation from below. This created in turn the decline of class as the paradigm organizing political confrontations, on the one hand, while it fostered – on the other – angers that could no longer be expressed through class politics. The result, yesterday as today, appears to be an exclusive logic of political participation whose fundamental divide is between (those who see themselves as) ‘established’ and ‘outsiders’ of the political system. Here, the very logic of confrontation changes: it is not any longer about seeing one’s argument prevail over the other’s, but about disqualifying the moral legitimacy of the other as an interlocutor.

Within this context, both the established and outsiders tend to develop logico-aesthetic apparatuses asserting the increasing irrelevance of left and right categories, while producing ‘neither left nor right’ ideological patterns and formations (‘Third Position’, ‘The Third Way’, the ‘Neue Mitte’, etc.). As we have seen, ‘neither left nor right’ politics succeed in erasing the class paradigm (and, progressively, class consciousness) from public debates, but also seem to enhance processes of fragmentation of the social/political world, where emotionally charged systems of incommensurable values divide rich and poor, rooted and uprooted (Holmes 2000: 112).

There – to my mind – lies the problem with these ideologies, be they grassroots or instituted: the incommensurability of diversity they end up postulating makes mutual recognition impossible and political negotiation vain, leaving violence (be it symbolic, physical, or even just ideological) as a dangerous option looming in the background.

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## Notes

1. 'Neither left nor right: we're only free minds'.
2. 'Fuck-off Day'.
3. For a bright example of these postulations see one of the foundational texts of the Italian new right: Tarchi, Solinas and Veneziani (1982). In relation to the constitution of fascist ideology, Sternhell has analysed the 'post-ideological' dimension of political discourses in Sternhell (1987 [1983]) and Sternhell, Sznajder and Asheri (1989).
4. Democrazia Cristiana (DC).
5. These had already had a long history of militancy within the area of the left. Since the mid 50s, in fact, after the disclosure of Stalinist crimes by the secretary Khrushchev and the violent repression of Hungarian revolt had exposed the authoritarian shadows of Sovietic communism, non-aligned political and intellectual formations had started to emerge within the Italian left. Central among these had been the journal 'Quaderni Rossi' (Red Notebooks, first published in 1961) and the group of militant intellectuals that animated it, a current of thought that subsequently became known as Operaismo (Workerism). A second journal – named 'Classe Operaia' (Working Class) – had originated from the former in 1963. This journal, and the people who gravitated around it, was the basis for what then became one of the prominent leftist organizations of the Italian early 70s: Potere Operaio (Workers' Power). After the historical experience of Potere Operaio ended, in 1973, a new formation was constituted from the ashes of the former: 'Autonomia Operaia' (Workers' Autonomy), which was active mostly in the later part of the decade and was led by people who had been active in Potere Operaio (Oreste Scalzone, Franco Piperno) or both Potere Operaio and – before that – Quaderni Rossi (Toni Negri). Autonomia was actually a crucial segment of the organized protest that had chased the CGIL secretary Lama away from La Sapienza, in February 1977. 'La cacciata di Lama' (The Lama Chase-away) – as it subsequently became known – triggered also a process of internal fragmentation within Autonomia Operaia, making what was known as 'ala creativa' (the creative wing) more marginal, whereas more radicalized elements clamoured for the need to raise the level of conflicts (by which many meant a call to armed struggle). The seminal experience of the 'Red Notebooks' generated another organization, 'Potere Operaio Toscano' (Tuscany's Workers' Power), which was created in 1966 around the charismatic figure of Adriano Sofri. This was later to become the funding

group of Lotta Continua (Continuous Struggle), which would be – throughout all of the Italian 70s – the largest and most important formation of the radical left.

6. Movimento Sociale Italiano was the extreme right party in Italy, founded in 1946; many of its active members had previous connections to Mussolini's fascist party. For an articulate history, see Ignazi (1998).
7. Acca Larentia was a foundational event in the history of Spontaneismo. On 7 January 1978, two young MSI militants were ambushed and killed by a supposedly left-wing commando while getting out of a MSI party branch via Acca Larentia. Hours later, after the whole Roman right-wing circle had gathered on the spot, riots arose in the neighbourhood, and a third militant was shot and killed by the police. The event collapsed old enemies and old friends into a single threat, and young neo-fascists reacted violently, committing a series of murders that targeted both the state and the left.
8. Let's Build the Action.
9. Armed Revolutionary Squads.
10. Third Position.
11. 'Government of national unity' was the government of 1976, when the PCI eventually supported a Christian Democrat cabinet hoping that majority and opposition would federate against the terrorist violence that was proliferating wildly throughout the country.
12. 'Historical Compromise' was the offer of a political collaboration that the Communist Party made in 1973 to the long standing adversaries of DC. The idea of a less confrontational attitude between the two major Italian parties was guided by communist fears of an authoritarian turn in the country (as it had been the case in Chile that very year, and would be one year later in Greece). The Compromesso eventually concretized in the 1976 government of national unity, and – before that – brought the two parties to less hostile political positions for half a decade.
13. 'Gathering of constitutional parties': it referred to the block of forces who had participated to the redaction of the Constitution. These were – of course – all the established parties of the time (with the exception of the neo-fascist MSI), and thus the expression implicitly excluded the grassroots movements that had emerged during the late 60s and 70s. Mention of the Arco Costituzionale generally implied a negative reference to the forces this expression excluded, which implicitly stood out as less civilized or democratic.
14. There were, of course, enormous differences in political behaviour between the parties at stake, and especially – I must specify – between the PCI and the rest. PCI remained, in many ways, the institutionalized political force representing the working class, and – somehow – its morality trumped that of the other established formations of the political spectrum. Nevertheless, a tendency of PCI to lose contact with its electoral basis was present in the minds of many. It seems quite intuitive that the rupture between the PCI and leftist movements subsequently pushed the former to increasingly give up dialogue with non-instituted realities.

15. This included small formations like 'Indiani Metropolitani' (the Metropolitan Indians), similar to the German contemporary phenomenon of Stadindianer, or the visionary 'Gli Uccelli' (The Birds). These groups were often composed of people disguising themselves by using symbols of nature, thereby trying to translate their criticism of the political system as a whole into an 'expressionist' politics of life (in ways that are not dissimilar to Isaiah Berlin's use of this term 1976: 153). Politics were here translated into an act of art – of rebellion; they were aestheticized into the theatrical representation of one's own alterity to 'the system'.

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