

Italy and Its Discontents. Family, Civil Society, State 1980-2001

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Reviewer: Mark Donovan

Paul Ginsborg is probably the leading English language historian of contemporary Italy.⁽¹⁾ His first history of post-Fascist Italy (it starts neither in 1945, nor 1948, but, quite rightly, in 1943), was path-breaking.⁽²⁾ Published in Italian and English, its historiographic approach was innovative for its placing of the family at the centre of its analysis, whilst in Italy such large-scale works of contemporary history were all but unknown, and in the English-speaking world no general history devoted to the period existed. Since then, Ginsborg has consolidated his reputation not only as a contemporary historian, but also as a public intellectual and in particular, as an outspoken critic of Silvio Berlusconi.⁽³⁾ A substantial further work extended his analysis well into the 1990s, embracing the turbulent end of the so-called 'First Republic', formally established in 1948, and the birth of the new order – or at least of the muddled transition to some supposed new political regime. The Italian edition of this most recent history was published in 1998 and covered the period 1980-1996, thus overlapping with the first (1943-88). The book reviewed here is its English 'equivalent', with the important difference that it reaches further into the present, covering also the period of the centre-left governments of 1996-2001, as well as (in a brief 'Postscript') Berlusconi once again becoming prime minister in 2001. The bulk of the last chapter, 'From Berlusconi to Berlusconi, 1994-2001', is thus substantially additional to the Italian edition.⁽⁴⁾ A striking feature of this work, as for the first history, is that some two-fifths of it are taken up by a statistical appendix (33 pages), endnotes (95 pages), bibliography (46 pages) and an extremely useful index (20 pages). These features attest to the solidity of Ginsborg's analysis whilst allowing readers to see for themselves, for example, the changing levels of educational attainment in Italy and elsewhere. The core reading matter in the first 330 pages constitutes some 140,000 words.

In the preface, Ginsborg establishes the fundamental importance of the evolution of the economy to his analysis, which in fact is the focus of his first chapter, and the history's foundation stone. This materialist base also accounts for his choice of start date, which overlaps with the analysis of his first history, since he takes the 1980 trade union defeat in Turin as symbolic of the end of the predominantly industrial era in Italy. The preface also highlights his commitment to awarding a central place to the family which, quoting Susan Moller Okin, he identifies as 'a political institution of primary importance' (p. xiii).⁽⁵⁾ He also points to 'the [his] almost complete abandonment of the traditional tools of the historian's craft', given how recent is the period that he studies. Instead, he relies on 'sociological surveys, on the anthropologist's eye, on newspaper reports, oral history, economists' texts, judicial transcripts, parliamentary inquiries' (p. xiv). The reviewer's

own discipline – if such it be – political science, is not referred to.

Chapter one identifies a shift to a post-industrial economy dominated by the service sector which, by 1995, accounted for 60 per cent of employment compared to 48 per cent in 1980 (p. 7). The political significance of this for ‘social hierarchies’, drawn out in chapter two, is that the industrial working class is no longer the key political protagonist that it had become in the 1970s. Rather, the middle classes have become central to political developments. The family too has been transformed as the female activity rate, although still comparatively low, increased from 22 to 30 per cent, 1961-91, whilst women’s social visibility grew disproportionately – the number of women judges and public prosecutors, for example, nearly doubling in the period 1985-92, to approximately a quarter of the total (p. 35).⁽⁶⁾

It is Ginsborg’s discussion of the middle classes, rather than of the family and gender issues, however, that has aroused most passions: specifically, his adoption of a dichotomous model of this sector, the basis of which is apparently politico-cultural, juxtaposing a ‘reflexive’ middle class against a ‘rampant and even irresponsible’ one (p. 43). The latter is a rent-seeking, tax-evading defender of the status quo, meaning the social exclusion of one-third of the population. A crucial point for understanding Italian specificities, is that this latter class is disproportionately large given the comparatively large sizes of small-scale, family capitalism and of the artisan and shop-keeping social categories (pp. 43-44). These non-reflexive middle classes are also characterised as ‘localistic, consumerist, strongly oriented both to self-interest and an over-riding work ethic’ (p. 66). By contrast, the reflexive middle class is judged to be relatively weak because the Italian welfare state has only a half to a third as many employees as the British, French and German states, and in any case has not developed a public service ethos (pp. 43-44). In sum, whilst the politico-cultural depictions of these two classes are striking, the categories are firmly rooted in economic logics tied to class and state analysis.

Many critics have seen in Ginsborg’s approach a moralistic denunciation of the core electoral constituency of Berlusconi’s right-wing alliance of Forza Italia, the Northern League and the National Alliance, especially given his emphasis on the importance of the different ethics of the two middle classes, and the centrality of values to his analysis of the relationship between Italian families, classes, and the state. The relationship between Italians and ‘their’ state is certainly intimately linked to key problems of political analysis: the state’s enduringly limited legitimacy, clientelism as a means of political linkage and aggregation, and the pervasiveness of corruption in both the private and the public spheres. Here it should be said that Ginsborg’s lack of illusions about Italian political culture renders his analysis more sound than much of the recent literature on ‘social capital’ in Italy, which tends to assume a generally benign government and consequently misidentifies and misinterprets relationships in civil society.⁽⁷⁾ Nevertheless, Anna Bull, perhaps Britain’s leading expert on the Northern League, makes a good point in criticising what might be termed Ginsborg’s manicheism.⁽⁸⁾ Her analysis of League supporters paints a more complex picture of the characteristics of Italy’s business classes, such that Ginsborg’s simplification borders on a demonising reductionism. The extent to which two relatively impermeable socio-political categories really do exist is a crucial question not only for understanding Italian politics, but for its future direction at this cusp of historical development. Among political scientists there is a strong school of thought, though not one that the reviewer finds persuasive, that the new bipolar party system has seen a rapid refreezing of the electorate, such that a stable majority favouring the centre-right now dominates, making further alternation unlikely for the foreseeable future.⁽⁹⁾ It would have been interesting to see Ginsborg make some reference to this debate.

Chapter three focuses on families and consumption, a key category for understanding modern culture, especially mass or popular culture to which chapter four turns. Here, Ginsborg’s analysis of clientelism, regarded by some as controversial, could probably go further, for as recent studies have shown, it is not simply a degenerate or corrupt phenomenon.⁽¹⁰⁾ Perhaps the main emphasis in these chapters is on the growth of an autonomous civil society, that is, one dominated neither by the Church nor the Communist party (PCI). This has been especially marked in the post-industrial period covered by the history, so that after the intense drama of the preceding decade, the 1980s did not simply bring a return to conformism. Moreover, this new social activism also embraces the South. In these arguments too, Ginsborg’s text is a

valuable corrective to stereotypes about Italy's lack of associationalism and regional political geography, as well to simplifications regarding the influence of, say, television and the Church. The contradictory nature of these institutions, especially the latter, is captured eloquently and, as with so much in the book, often very entertainingly.

From Chapter five, the focus shifts explicitly to the political. Again Ginsborg's contextualisation of his discussion is exemplary. Better still, he tackles almost immediately another myth of contemporary Italian politics, that of 'consociationalism', or consensual elite behaviour. Here, he agrees that the PCI co-operated with the DC, but rightly distinguishes minor 'parliamentary horse-trading' (and worse) from that governmental participation and reciprocal legitimacy which is accorded to party elites in Lijphart's original model of consociational democracy (p. 141). In that model, the elites were able to co-operate because their respective hinterlands tolerated it. In Italy, such open collaboration was intolerable to the mass electorate and to party rank-and-file, as seen in the 1940s and again in the late 1970s. Yet without a degree of elite co-operation, a democracy cannot function. A striking illustration of the lack of consensus in Italian society was, of course, Italy's unparalleled period of terrorism (conventionally, 1969-82), partly rooted in ideological polarisation. This latter phenomenon, which in important respects continues, and which was made famous by Sartori's model of Italian politics ('polarised pluralism') severely challenges the relevance of consociational theory to Italy, although Ginsborg does not specifically cite it. The PCI had to negotiate a hugely difficult path between leading and containing political intransigence. On another point, however, the stability of Italian voting patterns (p. 140) is questionable, not least given the doubling of the PCI vote between 1948-76. In any case, Ginsborg's judgments on the PCI are harsh, but arguably not unreasonably so. His account of Bettino Craxi's impact on Italian government and politics, as of Giulio Andreotti's, is exceptionally balanced, condemning much, but also, in particular with regard to the latter, signalling his many reforms (pp. 165-8).

It is at this point, chapter six, that Ginsborg inserts a chapter on 'Corruption and the Mafia'. In this way, the chapters on society, and chapter seven on the state, are linked by both a chapter on political parties, in which the machinations of Propaganda-2, uncovered in 1981, are discussed, and by a chapter which focuses on the complex illegal and judicial linkages between the state and society. This is clearly an important choice, and it might be argued that Ginsborg makes up here for his reticence regarding such matters in his first history, where he himself has suggested that his faithfulness to the historian's regard for documentation may have been a weakness.⁽¹¹⁾ To some extent, Ginsborg has been helped in doing this by the spectacular trials of the 1990s which have put new evidence in to the public domain. Nevertheless, evaluation and interpretation are fundamental to the judicial process, as Ginsborg records when he points to the shifting evaluations of the secret masonic lodge, Propaganda-2, from the parliamentary committee of inquiry, via several trials to the decision of the supreme appeal court in 1994 (pp. 147-48). More recently, judicial uncertainty has been spectacularly highlighted by the decision of the Perugia Appeal Court (17 November 2002) which overturned the decision of a lower court to rule that Andreotti was guilty of complicity in the murder of an investigative journalist in 1979. Juridically speaking, the case is not yet closed, since it too will be taken up by the supreme appeal court. In the meantime, Ginsborg's assessment of Andreotti's court performances as evasive, dismissive and dishonest with regard to his knowledge of the situation in Sicily (p. 205), like his doubts about the official version regarding the anti-Communist Gladio organisation (p. 172), suggest that he is sceptical about the ability of even judicial inquiry to resolve the issue of the significance of conspiracy to Italian politics.

The final two chapters, on the 1992-94 'dénouement' and its outcome to 2001 have to cover a huge range of developments as well as a considerable interpretative problem. Ginsborg rejects the 'Cassandrian' view of the crisis as inevitable, identifying not merely multiple causes, but multiple levels of causation: international, institutional, societal, organised criminal and, invoking Oakeshott, sequentiality (pp. 250-53). This is a welcome attempt at analytical clarity which those seeking explanation should heed, given the inevitable prevalence of studies which offer only partial perspectives. They are few who feel able to do more. Still, from a perspective subsequent to the Right's election victory of 2001, this final section of the book can already look dated given the centrality of concerns raised by Berlusconi's return to power. Both the scope of

the last chapters and simple chronology displace Berlusconi, given the success of the Left's Olive Tree (*Ulivo*) coalition in 1996 and Berlusconi's subsequent relative marginalisation – until 2001. Yet with further hindsight, we may still find that Berlusconi's centrality to contemporary Italian politics was no more alarming than that of De Gaulle's to French politics 30-35 years ago.

For the moment, however, Italy appears to be at the forefront of a trend to post-party democracy, if such a thing is possible.[\(12\)](#) What might this new form of democracy be? One aspect of political change in Italy is a technocratic turn in policy-making that has seen the strengthening of government, as against parliament. In this respect, Italy might be regarded as 'catching up' with other parliamentary democracies.[\(13\)](#) However, in taking place against a background of party decline, especially at the electoral level, so that the media, and in particular television, acquires particular significance, then populist and plebiscitary developments suggest that a strong leader such as Berlusconi may be steering Italian democracy towards an illiberal outcome. Here again, some reflection by Ginsborg on the relevant political science literature would have been welcome – although, to be fair to him, much of it is very recent.[\(14\)](#)

In conclusion, this is an outstanding work. Inevitably, given the polarised and polarising nature of contemporary Italian politics, many will find some, perhaps many, of its political judgments unacceptable. Yet none of these is without carefully explained foundation. This is a work which will influence many, and deservedly so. Therefore I can only assume that the paperback version will be available very soon.[\(15\)](#) This is a history that deserves the widest possible reading both for the importance of the issues discussed, and for the exemplary way in which they are handled.

Notes

The author very much appreciates Dr Donovan's review and does not wish to make any particular comment.

1. Donald Sassoon probably comes closest, with his outstanding semi-history, semi-politics text, *Contemporary Italy. Economy, Society and Politics since 1945* (2nd edition; Longman; London, 1997). The first edition preceded Ginsborg's English language history by four years.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. P. Ginsborg, *Storia d'Italia dal dopoguerra a oggi* (Einaudi; Turin, 1989); *A History of Contemporary Italy. Society and Politics 1943-1988* (Penguin; London, 1990).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Since 1992, Ginsborg has lectured the History of Contemporary Europe at Florence University. He achieved particular prominence in early 2002 as one of the figures championing the birth of what some describe as a new social movement which is hostile to the Berlusconi government yet disillusioned with the parliamentary opposition. Ginsborg has become less prominent as the movement has developed into a major political phenomenon.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. P. Ginsborg, *L'Italia del tempo presente. Famiglia, società civile, Stato. 1980-1996* (Einaudi; Turin, 1998).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. S. Moller Okin, *Justice, Gender and the Family* (Basic Books; New York, 1989).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. By 2002 they comprised 38 per cent of the total: *Corriere della Sera*, 16 January 2003.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. See F. Sabetti, *The Search for Good Government. Understanding the Paradoxes of Italian Democracy* (McGill-Queen's University Press; Montreal, 2000).[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. A. Bull, *Social Identities and Political Cultures in Italy* (Berghahn; New York and London, 2000); idem and M. Gilbert, *The Lega Nord and the Northern Question in Italian Politics* (Palgrave; Basingstoke, 2001).[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. See M. Donovan, 'A Second Republic for Italy?', *Political Studies Review*, 1:1 (2003), 18-33, for a review of some of the most recent literature covering this debate.[Back to \(9\)](#)
10. S. Piattoni (ed.), *Clientelism, Interests, and Democratic Representation. The European Experience in Historical and Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge University Press; Cambridge, 2001).[Back to \(10\)](#)
11. In a discussion of his history at the Italian Cultural Institute, with other historians of contemporary histories of Italy, in April 1993.[Back to \(11\)](#)
12. Recent works suggest this previously unthinkable possibility should be thought: R. J. Dalton and M. P. Wattenberg, 'Unthinkable democracy: political change in advanced industrial democracies', in idem,

eds, *Parties without Partisans. Political Change in Advanced Industrial Democracies* (Oxford University Press; Oxford, 2000), pp. 3-16.[Back to \(12\)](#)

13. See G. Capano and M. Giuliani, 'Governing without surviving? An Italian paradox: law-making in Italy, 1987-2001', *Journal of Legislative Studies*, 7:4 (2001), 12-36.[Back to \(13\)](#)
14. Most recently, Y. Mény and Y. Surel, *Populismo e democrazia* (Il Mulino; Bologna, 2001), but a literature was developing in the 1990s, see for example S. Immerfall, 'Party politics of the Right: Neo-populist parties and the future of the West European party system', *West European Politics*, 19:2 (1996), 410-15; and S. N. Eisenstadt, *Paradoxes of Democracy* (The Johns Hopkins University Press; Baltimore, 1999).[Back to \(14\)](#)
15. Editorial note: the paperback edition is now available from Penguin.[Back to \(15\)](#)

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