

WHO AM I? AN ARTIST

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Telos: Right now, we are facing an unprecedented transition in Italian political history that corresponds to a political landscape with very few points of reference. Could you help us understand the trajectories of the main parties? What impact will their experience of (or opposition to) the Draghi government have on them?

Pietrangelo Buttafuoco: I believe this is an unusual time for politics, not so much because of the overall context, that of the pandemic, but because the Italians found either the man of their destiny or the man of Divine Providence.

Right now, we are experiencing what we could define as the "Duce-isation" of Mario Draghi. Not so much because he wants so but because of what others want him to be and the ineptitude of the political framework, which should tune in to times of transformation and change.

I say this because there has not been the least bit of analysis or cold rationalisation in lining up the facts, what there has been is the desire to *delegate to him*; so, we can imagine he is ready for anything: he can be the President of the Republic, he can be the Prime Minister, even though it almost seems like a shame because the term would be over soon.

So, this is a "Duce-isation" under way that does not imply any clear, convinced support of this or that project, but rather on a mood or feeling.

Unlike the American, Western-movie inspired, choral vision of "our boys to the rescue", the Italian vision is based on just one, single man who has finally arrived and is more like "we need a man and here he is!"

I am going to imagine the parties by analysing them from right to left. Let's start from the left, because the left coincides with the system, the left coincides with the establishment, the left coincides with power. Anyone who wants a career has to get under the protective umbrella of the left, and everyone knows that in all times of crisis and difficulty, in the business world and in any other sector, to save yourself, you dive to the left.

The Democratic Party, which has inherited the two complementary, more than contrasting, "churches" of the First Republic of Italy, i.e., the Communist Party and Christian Democracy, becomes an amoeba in all these transformations. Remember that until not too long ago, the Democratic Party wanted anything but Draghi as a solution. It was leaning toward re-appointing former Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, who enjoyed a brief stint as the "*man of Divine Providence or of unforeseen destiny*", then he was quickly forgotten and dumped as soon as he was out of the spotlight.

The Democratic Party immediately adopted Mario Draghi because of its ability to adapt owing to an age-old tradition, because it is always there in the cracks of the system of Italy and power.

This has allowed it to be omnipresent and decisive and, above all, to avoid any uproar: lots of *wonderful* things go by in silence and faith in the conformity of the Italians, who are willing to accept anything.

Anyway, we Italians are also the home of Gioacchino Rossini, so we like to go *andante allegro* like in a comedy, but we are also the home of melodrama, so we feel this need to emphasise everything.

I have a theory on the Five-Star Movement: Five-Star Movement is the direct descendant of the one great defiance Italy has been able to afford from post-WWII to today and this is the great defiance which goes by the name of Silvio Berlusconi.

He disrupted everything, he was the embodiment of the 1968 myth of power to the imagination, and unleashed all *possible* variants. The same Five-Star Movement, which came about in opposition to him, follows this same path.

The difference is that he has managed to become the original model and is the first, unique reference in which an era, a story, a history comes to an end. Obviously, the others only repeated some patterns. There is no question about the close kinship between what Berlusconi did and what Beppe Grillo was able to do later.

Any other contrasting identification would inevitably contain these roots, and this is true for the Five-Star Movement, which ended miserably just because, on the one hand, it failed to yield results in terms of administration and, on the other, all it did was confirm the other, fundamental if not main, identity of Italy, i.e. transformism.

If we line up their biographies, this is the transition we see: for example, recently, Luigi Di Maio said he would never get up on the balcony he declared he abolished poverty from, and this makes me think of that great joke of Ettore Petrolini where, when the audience in the gallery begins to criticise him, he says: "I'm not angry at you, I'm angry at the guy next to you who doesn't throw you over the side." In every way, more than the heir of Casaleggio or Grillo, Di Maio is the only heir of Arnaldo Forlani. If ever there was a Forlani of the digital era, it's him.

What is the situation on the right? We are looking at something that has not historically been right-wing, if we think back to the big political seasons of the 20th century.

Now Brothers of Italy finds itself playing the role of the right, but culturally, it comes from something that has nothing to do with what nowadays is supposed to be the 'must have' weaponry, especially in its language.

They end up as the conservative right while their cultural baggage, instead, tells a story that is rooted in a profoundness that is

difficult to spend as hard currency in *politicking*.

But let's go to the heart of the issue: Brothers of Italy is actually just one person: Giorgia Meloni, who has invested a lot in herself in terms of effort, study, analysis and charisma. Obviously, with the best of intentions, we cannot imagine this as the party's success: it's only her success.

The League... First, we are talking about the only, old party in our memory, always if we are willing to accept the fiction that the Democratic party is a "novelty".

However, the League has a huge advantage, i.e., behind it there is a well-defined social bloc that is coherent and in line with the dictates the League operates on.

I am going to say something that might sound scandalous, but any sensible person should want to be governed by a mayor from the League because they are pragmatic, they get things done quick and, most importantly, they are unideological.

Then there is *Salvini-ism*, which is something different. *Salvini-ism* is a pop phenomenon, maybe symmetrical to the one of Giorgia Meloni, but always following in the path laid down by Berlusconi in the immediate relationship between the pop figure and the *sentiment* of public opinion.

And anyway, they are interchangeable and the elector who votes Berlusconi could also vote for Salvini, or for Meloni, and was ready to vote, mainly in Southern Italy, for the Five-Star Movement.

What is unique about the League is this dual register: on the one hand, *Salvini-ism* as a system of instant communication between the leader and his electors or the public and, on the other, it has pragmatically preserved a Leninist tool, i.e., the party congress.

This is why Salvini, whose public communication is immediate, might find himself outside the Secretariat because the party statute still only allows party members, not citizens in the primaries, to choose.

Brutally simplified, he's Trotsky.

Every now and then in Italy there is a protest against the system, a vote against the system. Since the 2018 elections, anti-fascism has emerged again as a category. What is this category today? Is it just a last resort to (re)claim a sense of belonging with no identity or is this category still justifiably alive?

Obviously, when public opinion is manipulated, this implies a phase which is to take advantage of the childish nature hoped for - and always found - in public opinion. A bit like when mothers tell their kids "watch out for the bogeyman" to get them to sleep, power systems have always relied on the bogeyman. And people have an almost theological attitude to this bogeyman, i.e., identifying the absolute good on which absolute evil continually looms, without considering however the nature of the Italians - and the actual facts - that everyone, even the people at the top of the institutional hierarchy, if they found themselves thrown back in time, today they would be in the same place they are now, but wearing black shirts.

Without a doubt. Today the Corriere della Sera writes in a certain way, and in 1936 it would have had the same prose but with other protagonists, just like the famous surveys praising institutional figures were consecrated to His Majesty the King.

This attitude is part theological and part sycophant, then obviously with a healthy dose of bad faith and always trusting in people's lack of critical spirit. For a form of *savoir vivre* and worldliness it is being hushed and so in all representations of the official showcase.

How would you describe yourself? An engaged intellectual, a dissident, ex-politician, journalist, polemicist, or philosopher?

An artist. That is how I would define myself. Here I do intellectual work, but my true nature is of an artist, meaning that I haunt both the pages and the planks of the stage.

You debuted as a writer in 2005 with *Le uova del drago* (Dragon's Eggs). The sophisticated, almost Baroque, language of this novel became a hallmark of your style. Yet your storytelling has evolved since then, or simply changed, and has gone down the path of epics or into bewitched settings with mystical overtones and seems inspired by traditional Sicilian *cuntu*. What can you tell us about Buttafuoco the novelist?

I always start from true stories. I like telling them in absolute respect of readers because I want to avoid the effect where intellectuals often spend sleepless nights only to secure sleep for their readers or listeners. I liked it very much and it was very useful to me, and I always benefit from my professional experience with Giovanni Minoli on the radio because, in there, there is an exercise in synthesis and sound and performance that has helped me a lot in my other writings as well.

Marco Sonsini

Editorial

Our talk with Pietrangelo Buttafuoco gave us the opportunity to contemplate the big *fresco* of Italian politics, and it is all the more valuable and ennobled by how elegantly he expresses himself and his ability to grasp the dramatic and *melodramatic* aspects of and the link between the nature of national politics and the anthropology of the Italian people.

This is rocky terrain, and you need to proceed with great caution, especially in order to resist the temptation to unduly apply abstract moral categories to political phenomena.

So, recurring words like "transformism", "populism" and even "fascism" must be continuously redefined, linked again to the *things* they really stand for, if we want them to actually say something real and concrete about our history and our present.

Let's try a little exercise, based on Buttafuoco's food for thought. The word "transformism" usually refers to when individual MPs do a flip-flop and change which political group they belong to in Parliament. This is just a short step away from a negative anthropology, i.e., the idea of the self-seeking, opportunist Italian.

However, we can explain political transformism without resorting to moral judgements if we just keep in mind that it occurs at specific times in history, i.e., anytime the reasons for party opposition that dominated the political scene in the preceding period disappear.

This is true both for post-Unification Italy and for post-Cold-War Italy, where opposition hinging on Communism/Anti-

Communism no longer made any sense and the parties that inherited all the political traditions gradually fell in line behind the orthodoxy of globalisation: and this is why the Centre has more and more parties... and fewer and fewer electors!

The success of *populist* movements and their leaders is none other than the reaction of a politically disoriented electorate, a reaction that gets brushed off as a gut reaction, or as pure protest. However, if the whole political system moves to the Centre and the only way for citizens to show their dissent is through their vote, could they have reacted differently?

A well-thought-out reaction, not a gut reaction, would imply that there is central hub of alternative political thought; though, this is highly unlikely in the age of liquid parties. The next thing that attracts people to populist movements in the system, i.e., in the mechanisms of centrist transformism, derives from their lack of structure and identity, or rather, from the fact that they are not parties.

The bogeyman of *fascism* is the response of the political system and the intellectuals who run to its defence in order to counter advancing dissent, using rhetoric to compensate for a lack of ideas. Two features of this rhetoric should be highlighted, both proving how out of touch with reality it is.

Defending the Republic from fascism would mean, in positive terms, promoting the Italian Constitution and its principles, i.e., the soundest and most fertile legacy of the anti-fascist parties: work, full employment, decent wages, free universal welfare, savings protection, home ownership and much more.

Unfortunately, the anti-fascists of today (and the eternal Liberals) prefer to remain silent on the first part of the Constitution. And that's not all: today's anti-fascism implies a rather skewed, or at least biased, representation of fascism.

Curiously, no one remembers that fascism became a regime thanks to the complicity of the Italian ruling classes and the favour of the major powers, because it guaranteed that Italy would help to restore the international economic order, *whatever the domestic cost*, which meant austerity, sacrifice, wage and union repression in addition to political dissent.

Yet rhetorical anti-fascism still seems to function as an assertion of identity, at least for the high classes, or perhaps simply as a pass for any gathering of well-educated people.

And here we are again with our cover. The cover for this November is in line with the graphics of this year and features a white page torn to reveal a part of the interview in Italian and English, with an insect looking up at the words.

We have dedicated a "Cubist" insect to Buttafuoco: the *Sphaerocoris annulus*. Some might call it *aposematic*, meaning that it uses bright colours and high-contrast patterns to warn and repel predators. Others might just call it *beautiful*. Just look at it and you will see why this extravagant insect is also called the Picasso bug: it is as if its shell had been carefully painted by a cubist artist, featuring a pattern made up of an average of 11 rings of green, red and black and a background, with great attention to detail, consisting in patches of sea green and a delicate beige.

Mariella Palazzolo



Pietrangelo Buttafuoco is a journalist and writer. After earning a Degree in Philosophy from the University of Catania, he began his career in journalism. In 1993 he was hired by Italian newspaper *Il Secolo d'Italia* and also collaborated with *Il Giornale*. In 1995 and 1996 he was the editor-in chief of the political magazine *L'Italia Settimanale*. He later wrote for the newspaper *Il Foglio* and the weekly magazine *Panorama*. Today he writes for the newspaper *Il Fatto Quotidiano* and collaborates with *Il Quotidiano del Sud*. He is also a TV journalist and in the late nineties was the host of the TV show *Sali e Tabacchi* on Canale 5 and in 2011 *Questa non è una pipa* on RAI 5. From June to September 2007 he hosted *Otto e mezzo* for LA7 along with Alessandra Sardonì.

Buttafuoco comes from a family of politicians – Antonino, his uncle, was a longstanding MP for Italian Social Movement – and started his career in politics as a student: first as the national leader of the Youth Front, then in 1991 he was appointed to the Central Committee of the Italian Social Movement. From 1995 to 2003 he was a member of the National Assembly of the National Alliance.

In 2005 he published his first novel, *Le uova del drago*, which was a finalist for the 2006 Campiello Prize, then *L'ultima del diavolo* (2008), *Cabaret Voltaire* (2008), *Fimmini* (2009), *Il lupo e la luna* (2011), *Fuochi* (2012), *Il dolore pazzo dell'amore* (2013), *Buttanissima Sicilia* (2014) and *Il feroce Saracino* (2015). He is also the

author of a very long series of essays, including *Fogli consanguinei* (2002), *L'ora che viene. Intorno a Evola e a Spengler* (2004), *Armatevi e morite. Perché la difesa fai da te è un inganno (e non è di destra)* (2017) and *Salvini e/o Mussolini* (2020). In 2019 he was appointed president of the Teatro Stabile in Abruzzo, and until 2012 he was the president of the Teatro Stabile in Catania.

In October 2021 his latest novel was released, *Sono cose che passano*.

His only real hobby is the countryside, which he loves and cares for like a true Sicilian farmer. During our conversation, a wonderful memory came up, about the traditional threshing and weighing of grain with a donkey-driven rotary mill...

Marco Sonsini