

An Overview of the Ethical-Political History of Italy

by Franco Manni

1. Introduction

This lecture will *not* be an analysis of recent Italian political facts: everybody can find on the Internet plenty of data about Berlusconi's trials, Italian parliaments, governments, political parties, the relationships between Italy and the other States, and the Italian economic situation. (and I have given you a few sheets which summarize the judicial and political deeds of Berlusconi).

Now, instead, I would like to say just some things that seem to me more pressing for knowledge.

“More pressing” things for two reasons: 1) because most of them oppose the most common clichés about Italy nowadays; 2) because they are a sort of deepening of the causes of the facts, something which quite often has been omitted in the usual analyses.

The title itself of this lecture has the unusual compound word “Ethical-political”, which has been loved by the Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce and recalls the link between Political History and Philosophical Ethics. This lecture will be mainly historical and philosophical, and will not be a journalistic chronicle. I’m doing this because I think that the Present can be understood more in depth only if we are aware of the Past which has built it, and only if we are aware of the Ideals - I mean the ethical ideas - which direct human will towards the future.

Since the topic of the lecture is so wide (Italian history) and the timetable is so strict, in the title I have put the word “overview” which implies a sort of quick survey where everything is summarized and just stated but not demonstrated: maybe I should have used the word “pointers” - instead - and the phrase “some pointers on the main outlines of Italian history”.

2. An Outline of Ancient History

The Italians are not the Romans! If the Romans had conquered many nations for centuries, the Italians have been conquered by many nations for centuries. If the Romans were brave in fighting and won hundreds of battles, the Italians have lost most of the battles which they fought, and the clearest example is WWII, when the Italians lost *all* the battles in the air, on land, at sea.

The Roman Empire had many emperors who did not come from the Italian Province, think of Trajan, Hadrian, Marcus Aurelius, Septimius Severus, Caracalla, Diocletianus, Constantine, etcetera): the Italian Kingdom and the Italian Republic had just Italian kings and presidents.

At their peak, the Romans had emperors who wrote their works in Greek (Hadrian, Marcus Aurelius), while Italian politicians of nowadays are among the least learned in foreign languages in the European Union.

Let us distinguish “Nation” from “State”. The Nation is a cultural entity in which the people communicate the traditions learnt in their families, such as eating and sexual habits, trades, and most of all the mother language. The State is a political entity suited for power (the “sovereign” that is highest power), which demands the monopolising of physical strength, through the police and the army, and by these means makes the law be respected.

The relationship between State and Nation in Italian history is the opposite of the one in Roman history: the Roman Empire was one state ruling many nations speaking many languages; the Italians in their first millennium were one nation divided in many states.

In fact, we can speak of “Italians” only after the end of the 10th century, when we had the first simple

documents written in the Italian language. Italian literature with its poets, storytellers and scholars began just in the 13th century.

With regard to the political aspect, after it was conquered by the Lombards in the 6th century, for many centuries the Italian peninsula was divided in several little states, ruled by leaders of other and non-Italian nationalities (such as Byzantines, Arabs, Normans, French, Spanish, Austrians), and also by Italian “dukes”, “lords” and “kings” of little power. During the 45 years between the Congress of Vienna in 1815 and the political unification of the Italians in 1860, there were seven Italian states, each with its different capital, currency, army, ambassadors, system of weights and measures.

While the English had already had their political unification in the 10th century, and the Spanish and the French in the 15th century, the Italians had it in just 1860 !

What is the cause of this belated unification? The great historians of the XVI century Niccolò Machiavelli e Francesco Guicciardini had no doubt in answering the question, it was the papacy: “the pope is not powerful enough to submit all the Italians under his sovereignty, but is powerful enough to prevent any other Italian sovereign from doing that.”

Indeed, an important and unique factor in the Italian history is this: in Antiquity, in the Dark Ages and afterwards, the centre of the pope's power, and thus of the Catholic church's power, has always been in Rome, in the centre of Italy (the Avignon Papacy apart, that is the period from 1309 to 1378, during which seven successive popes resided in Avignon, in France, rather than in Rome).

3. Italians' “Finest hour”

From 1820 till 1860 in Italy there was a cultural, ethical, political and military movement called “Risorgimento”. It aimed at the independence of the Italians from the rule of the Austrians, who dominated - either directly or indirectly - five of the seven little states inhabited by the Italians, with the exception of the Piedmont and the State of the Church. The “Risorgimento” aimed for independence, not political unification, which, nevertheless, had become the same through a series of coincidences in the international political situation.

Many Italian intellectuals (such as Alessandro Manzoni, Vincenzo Gioberti, Massimo d'Azeglio, among the others) gave the ruling class of the small Italian states the ethical ideal of independence from foreign domination. Just the ruling class, because 80% of the Italian people were illiterate and uninterested in any political ideal whatsoever.

The most important of those intellectuals was Giuseppe Mazzini, who was the only one who since the very beginning of the Risorgimento was aiming not just for independence but also for political unification. Mazzini was an exile from Piedmont, his country, because of his revolutionary attempts which failed. He spent most of his life in London, whence - by the means of thousands of letters and a network of emissaries - he was able to lead and organize the so called “Giovane Italia” (Young Italy), a revolutionary society. I strongly recommend you to deepen your knowledge of him. He has been nicknamed “The Beating Heart of Italy”. In 1919, in his travels to Versailles for the treaties of peace after the end of WWI, the president of the US Woodrow Wilson stopped in Genova (where Mazzini was born) and, while placing a laurel wreath at the feet of Mazzini's statue, said: “Only Gladstone and Lincoln had such clarity of insight into the essence of liberalism. I am very much moved, sir [the Mayor of Genova], to be in the presence of this monument. On the other side of the water we have studied the life of Mazzini with almost as much pride as if we shared in the glory of his history, and I am very glad to acknowledge that his spirit has been handed down to us of a later generation on both sides of the water. It is delightful to me to feel that I am taking some part in accomplishing the realisation of the ideals to which his life and thought were devoted. It is with a spirit of veneration, sir, and with a spirit, I hope, of emulation, that I stand in the presence of this monument and bring my greetings and the greetings of America with our homage to the great Mazzini.”. And it was Mazzini who inspired Wilson's famous 14 Points.

David Lloyd George, war-time Prime Minister and founder of the League of Nations, said: “I doubt whether any man of his generation exercised so profound an influence on the destinies of Europe as did

Mazzini. The map of Europe as we see it today is the map of Giuseppe Mazzini. He was the prophet of free nationality. The glittering imperial fabric reared by Bismarck is humbled in the dust, but the dream of this young man, who came over as an exile to England and lived in poverty here for years, dependent on the charity of friends and armed only with a pen, have now become startling realities through the whole continent. He taught us not merely the rights of a nation; he taught us the rights of other nations. He is the father of the idea of the League of Nations.”

For Giuseppe Garibaldi Mazzini was “The Man who taught us all” – and not just Italians. Nietzsche stated, “The man I most venerate is Mazzini.” For Mazzini’s friend John Stuart Mill he was “one of the men I most respect” and for the historian Arnold Toynbee, who helped with his School, “not Adam Smith, not Carlyle great as he is, but Mazzini is the true teacher of our age. For Walter Bagehot, founding editor of the Economist and author of The English Constitution, Mazzini was “a perfect model of sagacity and moderation, magnanimity and disinterest. Undoubtedly he furnished the war materials of which the political strategy of Count Cavour was able to make such wonderful use. Cavour without Mazzini would have been an engineer without a source of force.”

In fact, another decisive major person of the Italian Risorgimento was Camillo count of Cavour, prime minister of the Piedmont State and a genius in the art of diplomacy: Cavour understood that in those years the Austrian Empire was politically isolated from the UK for ideological reasons, from the Ottoman Empire and the Russian Empire for claims on territories, and from the Kingdom of Prussia for their competition in the leadership of the German nation. On the other hand the Emperor of the French, Napoleon III was full of ambitions and longed for the hegemony in Europe and so he allied with Piedmont and his army defeated Austria in the bloody battle of Solferino (it was the bloodiest in 19th Europe after Waterloo, and the inception of the International Red Cross). This victory permitted the enterprise of general Garibaldi, who shipped 1000 volunteers in arms from Genova to Sicily to conquer the Kingdom of Naples under the rule of the Bourbon. His two ships were not sunk by the enemy Navy because they were protected by two British ships at the harbour of Marsala.

When, after the successful enterprise of Garibaldi, the Kingdom of Italy had been founded in 1860, Roma and its surrounding territory were not part of it yet, since Napoleon III with a French army was protecting the political independence of the State of the Church. Nevertheless, when Napoleon had been defeated and captured by the Kingdom of Prussia led by Bismarck, Italy took the opportunity, declared war to Pius IX, conquered Rome from the pope and made it the capital of the kingdom.

From these historical facts I want to single out these two concepts:

- ☐ the Italian independence and unification were achieved, just thanks to the decisive support of Foreign Powers: France, Britain, Prussia:
- ☐ the Italians who made the Risorgimento were a few thousand on a population of 22 million ! Garibaldi for his enterprise went to Sicily with just 1082 followers, who were veterans of all the previous conjures, coups, revolutionary attempts, battles of the Risorgimento in 1820-21, 1830, 1848-49, 1859 . The masses of the Italian people – instead - were insensitive, uninterested and even hostile.

4. An Outline of More Recent History

After WWI which was fought by Italy allied with Russia, England and France, a 20-year dictatorship began, the Fascist Regime of Benito Mussolini, endorsed by king Vittorio Emanuele III of Savoy. In the aftermath of the war Mussolini and his party got more and more votes until, in 1924 and then onwards, got an overwhelming majority. Italians did enthusiastically love Mussolini and recognized themselves in the political ideas and aims of Fascism. From 1936 Italy was allied with the Third Reich of Hitler, aiming to make war against both the Free World and the Soviet Union of Stalin. However, from 1942 the dynamic of the war reversed and Hitler and his allies began their retreat. In July 1943 an Anglo-American army led by General Alexander landed in Sicily and began to conquer the Italian peninsula from the South to the North. Then, because of the invasion, the king made Mussolini resign and put him in prison; it was the 25th July

1943 and immediately the king began secret negotiations with the UK and the USA so as to sign eventually an armistice on 8th September. In the meantime, however, the German troops had substituted the Italian ones in the war in Italy and resisted the invasion for a year and a half more.

During this period Italy was split into two parts: in the South, with a small and merely symbolic army of 60.000 soldiers, the king joined the Anglo-American Army, in the North the troops still loyal to Mussolini joined as a subaltern partner the German troops led by general Kesserling. Then we could see the renewal of the pattern of the XVI century wars: when some small Italian states, supported by the Kingdom of France, fought against some others supported by the Kingdom of Spain.

On 25 April 1945 the USA and the UK completed the invasion and ended the power of Nazis and Fascists in Italy. Mussolini, while fleeing to Switzerland disguised as a common soldier, had been recognized and killed.

Therefore, once again after the Risorgimento some Foreign Powers made Italy be included in modern Europe and in Western Civilisation.

The king had been obliged to resign after a referendum on the choice between Monarchy and Republic which took place on 2 June 1946. Philosopher Benedetto Croce (whose figure I will outline below) endorsed the Monarchy: he thought that, if Italy had become a republic, the State would have lost much power in its relationships with the Catholic Church and the papacy. However, among the major political parties the Communists and the Socialists were republican, and the Christian Democrats, while with internal divisions, had been led by a president – Alcide De Gasperi, who was republican. These were the results of the referendum: 10 million votes for the monarchy, 12 for the republic. Thus Italy became a republic and so different from the majority of the states of western Europe which were and still are monarchies.

Let us remember that, while the western monarchies either opposed Hitler or remained neutral (Norway, Denmark, Luxemburg, Belgium, Holland, Sweden, most of all the United Kingdom), the German republic of Weimar had quickly become prey of the Nazi Party, and the same happened in the Republic of Austria; and the Soviet Republic and the Hungarian Republic allied with Hitler. The French Republic opposed Hitler, true, but with hardly any determination: it was the problem of “defeatism” in the France of those times, so well told by Marc Bloch in the book he wrote after the sudden fall of the Armée, *Strange Defeat*, and it was the prelude to that puppet state called the Republic of Vichy.

Italy was the only western monarchy allied with Hitler, but nevertheless, as an Italian, I would call to mind some important facts: while in Germany no king could remove Chancellor Hitler, in Italy, instead, the king on 25 July 1943 removed and arrested Prime Minister Mussolini, and also, after some weeks, he signed the armistice with the Great Alliance. Afterwards the Kingdom of Italy (I mean the southern part of the country, from 8 September 1943 till 25 April 1945) joined the Anglo-American Army in the war against Hitler. If the king had not delayed the armistice in the weeks between the 25 July and the 8 September the war in Europe would have been shorter, since the Italian Campaign would have ended in the summer of 1943, because till that date there were almost no troops of the German Army in Italy. On the contrary, the king delayed because he was terrified of the vendetta which Hitler surely would take out on him, and so he needed time to prepare in secret his escape from Rome to join the Allies in Southern Italy. Therefore, after the imprisonment of Mussolini, in the weeks between the two dates, while Italy was continuing its war in the Axis, many divisions of the German army went to Italy, with the reasonable purpose of helping the Italian ally against the Anglo-Americans.

Nevertheless, all the same the two actions of the king (removing Mussolini and making the armistice) prevented the Italian army from supporting Hitler any more, and this fact surely helped to shorten (we cannot know how much) the war in Europe.

What I want to highlight by touching briefly on those facts is that the monarchical institution provides that a state has at its supreme position a person – the king – who does not receive his power from the political mood of the moment, and, thus, is more protected from those populist dictatorships which attempted to prevail in the XX century.

For instance, the Spanish Republic was prey to Francisco Franco's dictatorship in the Thirties, and, when Franco's regime ended, the Spanish thought it safer to restore the monarchy. Their decision proved wise

when King Juan Carlos de Bourbon firmly resisted the military coup d'etat of Colonel Antonio Tejero de Molina on 24 February 1981.

Moreover, Italy suffers and bears a special burden of its own: the presence in its territory of the pope and of his Holy See (the centre of the world Catholic Church). Pope Pius XI had supported Mussolini (he called him “the man of Providence”) and in 1929 had made with him a treatise which had given the Italian Catholic Church many privileges in the state and in society. His successor Pius XII, after the WWII and the end of the monarchy, thanks to an organic alliance with the major Italian political party, the Christian Democrats, had enlarged the influence of the church on Italian politics, on the institutions and on social habits. During his long office Pope John Paul II continued to enlarge those interferences of the papacy upon the Italian governments in the educational system, in the legislation for the family, in international policy, and, most of all, in the very heart of politics: making or preventing alliances between the political parties which were supposed to support the Italian governments.

Philosopher Benedetto Croce, when speaking of the referendum of 1946 on the choice between monarchy or republic, made a correct forecast. The flame of the Risorgimento would have been extinguished! The canonical beatification of pope Pius IX (the old enemy of the Italian Kingdom in 1870) made by Pope John Paul II in 2000 was a sort of seal of this papal victory upon the Italian State.

After WWII, Italy divided – at least in the public propaganda and explicit statements - into two political sides: the Pope's followers and the Stalin's followers (both the leader of the Communists, Palmiro Togliatti, and of the Socialists, Pietro Nenni, admired Stalin), and most of the voters and executives of both sides were – of course – former voters and executives of the fascist regime. On the other side, the Liberal Party, whose president was Benedetto Croce, had very few voters, and his commitment to the classical liberal doctrine (separation and balance of powers, the laity of the State and its separation from the church, the absolute value of individual and collective human rights) was shared just by a tiny minority of Italians, and nearly expelled from the mainstream culture of the universities, schools, publishing houses, journals, newspapers, and – afterwards – television..

Nevertheless, after the Conference of Yalta, the three Great Powers who had defeated the Axis and won the war, had decided that Italy had to remain under the influence of the Western Powers. Thus Italy first joined the Nato military western alliance (in 1949), and then the European Economic Community in 1957, which afterwards became the European Union in 1992. Italy, therefore, remained in the western world because of international alliances and economic convenience, but it has been alienated from the very heart of the western world in its innermost intimate convictions: political beliefs and cultural ideals, as I have already mentioned and I will revisit when I will focus on Italian culture.

Some minutes ago, speaking of the two political sides in which Italy was divided into, I added “at least in public propaganda and explicit statements”. Why? Because, indeed, things were not so clear (sadly, in Italy very seldom if ever are things spoken of clearly, honestly, consistently, transparently! In Italy seldom if ever was there and is there a clear contrast between government and opposition). In fact, since the very inception of the life of the Italian republic the leader of the Communists, Togliatti, decided that in the Constituent Assembly (convened in 1946) the communist delegates would vote in agreement with the Christian democrats to include in the prospective republican Constitution that treatise made by Mussolini and Pius XI in 1929. Only the Liberals and the Socialists opposed that inclusion, but they lost. Without that decision by Togliatti and thus without the votes of the communist delegates, that inclusion would never have been, and the power of the papacy upon the Italian Republic would have been greatly diminished.

An Outline of Contemporary History

This division between Christian Democrats and Communists lasted till 1991. In those decades the Socialists exploited their “middle” political position, joining the former in the governments but asking for more seats than it deserved, because threatening them to join the latter in the opposition.

In the meantime Italy had become the fifth industrialized country in the world.

After the end of Communist States in Eastern Europe, in Italy the system of the political parties changed : in between 1991 and 1994 the former parties (DC, PCI, PSI, PLI, PRI, PSDI, MSI) dissolved and were transformed into other ones. The Communists (PCI) split in two: a bigger and less radical Democratic Left-wing party (PDS) and a smaller and more radical Party for Re-founding Communism (PRC). The Christian Democrats split in two as well: a bigger and more liberal Italian Party of the People (PPI) and a smaller and more right-wing Christian Democrat Centre CCD (afterwards UDC). The Socialists were extinguished , being mortally stricken by the publicised scandals in bribery of their former leader , Bettino Craxi.

Seizing the opportunity, I mean the dissolving of power of the previous parties, a pool of judges in Milano, among whom the most famous was Antonio Di Pietro, started a wide investigation into politicians and business men to prosecute the two sides of corruption: I mean bribery and extortion. It was called Mani Pulite (clean hands) . There were many trials and sentences upon very important people in Italy of those years (Forlani, Craxi, Gardini, among many others). Almost at the same time two Sicilian judges, Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino succeeded in imprisoning important godfathers of the Mafia .

However, very soon the “reactionary front” ... reacted (!) against this attempt to westernise Italy, when the judges fought the systematic illegality in the North (bribery) and in the South (Mafia). First of all Falcone and Borsellino were isolated and then betrayed by some of their colleagues, and by some policemen and politicians . Finally, they were killed by the Mafia.

As for the end of Mani Pulite investigations and trials , that was the business and great success of Silvio Berlusconi, who had been helped by the worst among the previous politicians, by pope John Paul II, by the most bankrupt industrialists and managers and by the Mafia.

In a short time from 1994 onwards the party of rich tycoon Berlusconi and a xenophobic party called Lega Nord gained the majority of Italian votes . Berlusconi was appointed Prime Minister for three times , with the decisive – even if elusive - endorsement of cardinal Camillo Ruini, president of the Italian Conference of Bishops.

Even when Berlusconi was not in office (after the two general elections won by Romano Prodi, and the present government led by Enrico Letta, who is the nephew of Gianni Letta, the principal counsellor of Berlusconi) , even then he has always been the most powerful person in Italy, for a lot of reasons, but most of all because of his overwhelming power in the media: owner of three national tv networks and of many radio, newspapers, magazines, whose editors and journalist are just employees of his.... he also owns the major publishing houses Mondadori and Einaudi as well....; also, he has a lot of friends an semi-friends and flatterers and servants in the state television channels, and also in the second most widespread Italian newspaper, “Il corriere della sera”. He is the living nightmare realised by Orson Welles' in his celebrated film *Citizen Kane* ! So, even when he is not in the government, he can continuously manipulated public opinion and raise it against the government of his opponents.

His first government fell because of the (temporary) betrayal of his allied Lega Nord. Romano Prodi won the elections in 1996 but his government fell because of the betrayal of one his allies, the Party for Re-founding Communism . The government of Prodi's successor Massimo D'Alema (of the Democrats of the Left) was defeated in 2001 and Berlusconi was premier again, this time for 5 years. Those were the years of George W. Bush and Tony Blair, of the Twin towers, of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq...

In 2006 Prodi won the election for the second time, but his government lasted just two years because of the betrayal of some radical members of parliament (belonging to PRC) and some others of the right-wing of the alliance, bribed by Berlusconi.

Thus, in 2008 there were the anticipated elections and Berlusconi won again . But that government did not

last 5 years, even if it was supported by the large majority of the parliament. In fact, for the third time in its history Italy was helped by foreign powers. German Chancellor Angela Merkel, hostile towards Berlusconi, in August 2011 made the European Union impose on Italy strict conditions for the return of the public debt, a task which Berlusconi was not able to accomplish. And the German pope Benedict XVI, hostile towards Berlusconi, removed cardinal Ruini from his office and gave the Italian people more or less explicit messages of moral condemnation of Berlusconi's sex scandals. So, Giorgio Napolitano, the Italian president of the republic was able to make Berlusconi resign, threatening him with the dissolution of parliament and a call for new elections probably disastrous for Berlusconi's party (at least in those months!). Thus Berlusconi resigned, in spite of the support of the majority of parliament, and Napolitano appointed as premier a non-politician, a so called "technician", professor Mario Monti, widely renowned and esteemed in the European Union and the US. The government of Monti, of liberal and European convictions, honest, upright and clever in economics, lasted 18 months... he did his best to save Italy from economic collapse or at least to delay it.... Nevertheless, he could not promote structural laws against corruption, against tax evasion, against conflict of interests and others, because the majority of the MPs were still supporters of Berlusconi, who was waiting to return to power.

In the general elections of last April 2013 a new party led by the former comedian Beppe Grillo gained a big number of votes but he did not want to make an alliance either with PD or with Berlusconi the party of Berlusconi. So the PD and Berlusconi, the two parties pretending to be opponents, since neither had the majority required to support a government, made an alliance and formed the present Italian government!

However, Berlusconi himself does not hold an office in this present Italian government, neither as a premier nor as a minister. Why? Because, at least outside Italy, things *have been changed*, and if Berlusconi were a premier or a minister he would sometimes have to go to the Parliament of Strasbourg, to the White House, to the Berlin Bundeskanzleramt, to Buckingham Palace, to the Elysée, and to the Holy See, but the international leaders in those offices nowadays would not receive him!

Italian Culture

In the first half of the XX century Italian culture was flourishing and even admired abroad. The cause of that cultural flourishing was the moral and political achievement of the Risorgimento, it was the "long wave" of the Risorgimento. There were scientists like Guglielmo Marconi and Enrico Fermi, economists like Luigi Einaudi and Gaetano Salvemini. Most of all there was the philosopher Benedetto Croce, then famous all over the world and valued by Albert Einstein, Romain Rolland, Thomas Mann. The British philosopher Robin G. Collingwood acknowledged Croce's works as the main groundwork of his own philosophy.

However, Croce, besides being the most important opponent of Fascism, was also anti-communist and anticlerical. Therefore, he was not only isolated and excluded from Italian cultural institutions during the fascist era, but also, after (the) WWII, he suffered an ostracism (even of a different kind) from the Catholic Church and, most of all, from the Communist party, which for decades had been attracting most of the Italian intellectuals in its ranks. Palmiro Togliatti, Communists' leader in the Forties and Fifties, gave explicit directions for doing a sort of "anti-Croce" cultural propaganda. Togliatti's instructions have been accepted and implemented by most of Italian non-Catholic intellectuals from the Forties till the Seventies. Other anti-Croce directions had been given by Catholic cardinals, bishops, theologians, scholars, and also those directions have got a large audience in Italian culture.

Croce - an authentic European intellectual belonging to the tradition of Liberalism - was anti-fascist, anti-communist, anticlerical. Therefore, since fascism, Marxism and Catholicism were (and still are) the main Italian cultural features, first the Italian cultural establishment challenged and despised his ideas, then made the new generations forget him and his ideas. Indeed, they succeeded and so he and his ideas, for many years and still now, have been forgotten.

This refusal of its major thinker (and of the Western Liberal tradition of thought which had inspired him) led Italian culture to three consequences:

- 1) to be mainly Marxist in the principal universities, journals, newspapers, publishing houses. First following Soviet Marxism, and then - from 1968 onwards - the Maoist and Anarchist version of it;
- 2) to be slave to the ever-changing cultural fashions (existentialism, structuralism, post-modernism, logical positivism, etcetera) which were first embraced with childish enthusiasm and then soon dismissed and forgotten, as had been noticed and described by one of the very few upright Italian intellectuals of the late XX century, Norberto Bobbio;
- 3) to be mainly Right-wing Catholic in the everyday habits of family and community life.

More specifically, I observe here that the Italian university – since 1968 and onwards – has become more and more infected with influence peddling and cronyism . It has become deprived of meritocracy. Italian academics have been selected just for their links with the selectors: family relationships, active membership in the same political party, personal friendship, sex affairs, money exchange and sharing in business. Nowadays, in the most important international websites concerned with ranking the quality level of all the universities in the world, the best ranking achieved by an Italian university ranges (depending on the particular website) from 170th to 210th. Well, let us consider what a (deserved !) shame this ranking is for us Italians, who should have made something better of our ancient and qualified historical heritage in the sciences and the arts....

The Italian intellectuals who are most acclaimed in Italy nowadays, like Emanuele Severino (representative of the right-wing Catholic lineage) and Massimo Cacciari (representative of the Communist lineage) are almost unknown in the rest of the world... And, in my opinion, justly so!

One of the very few Italian intellectuals of today whom I esteem, that is the physicist and science historian Lucio Russo (whose main historical research, *The Forgotten revolution*, has been translated into many languages), has written a book about the Italian educational system and culture during the last decades : *Segmenti and Bastoncini*. Sadly it has not an English translation, but it deserves one! In this book Russo describes effectively and in a lively fashion some of the causes of the fast and heavy decline of our educational system .

Indeed, in order to get selected information and some profound interpretations of the Italian culture, I recommend to you Benedetto Croce's book *A History of Italy from 1870 till 1915*, for the Italian culture in the 19th century; Norberto Bobbio's *Ideological Profile of Twentieth-Century Italy* for the 20th century till the Seventies; and Lucio Russo's *Segmenti e bastoncini* from the Seventies until the beginning of the 21st century.

The Vices of the Italians

After having touched on the politicians, the industrialists, the clergy and the intellectuals, now I would like to speak of the Italian people in general, of its Vices and its Virtues. Since it is a widespread habit of fair-play to tolerate criticism against any people only if it is made by a person belonging to the same people, for instance a Jew may criticize the Jews, let me, an Italian, begin with the Vices of the Italians.

In my opinion, the most evil is the Arrogant Lack of Self-criticism. In my opinion, the most severe example of this vice is : *we* Italians were the Fascists and the allies of Hitler, *but* for 70 years onward (since the end of WWII) 99.99 percent of the Italians have been pretending and then believing and eventually and eventually identifying themselves in the main as Italian “partisans” who “freed” Italy from Nazi-fascism ! Never, in the 54 years of my life, have I heard – in the institutional speeches of the politicians, on the media, in common people's talk – a single hint of the historical truth, that is that was General Alexander and his army who freed the Italians from themselves (!) and from the dictatorship they had built and the wicked ally they had chosen.

The “partisans” - that is Italian anti-fascist guerrillas - indeed did exist, and some of them were heroes and even martyrs, *but* :

- 1) they began to exist only after the armistice of the 8th September 1943, when Italy had already been

defeated and invaded;

- 2) they were by and large just 20.00 people, in a population then of 33 millions: that is just one partisan for 1,500 Italians . I drew this data from the historians. However I myself carried out a direct test of historical research : since I teach the history of the XX century to the students of the fifth year in Italian grammar schools, I asked two different fifth year classes to ask their parents and grandparents still alive for this major piece of information about their family history, that is: whether among their 6 male ancestors (the two grandfathers and the four great-grandfathers) who were of a fitting age to fight in (the) WWII, there were any “partisans”. Summing up the two classes, my research dealt with 53 students, each with 6 male ancestors of the appropriate age , for a total of 378 . Here it is the result of my research: from 378 men who had inhabited the very heart of the Republican Sociale Italiana (the puppet state of Mussolini after the armistice, where only you could find partisans), in those twenty months of the “resistance” **NONE** of them had fought as a partisan (an anti Nazi-fascism guerilla) !

A present perverse effect of this old vice (the Lack of Self-criticism) is this: nowadays Italy has the highest rate of youth unemployment in the EU, the highest rate of tax evasion in the EU, the highest rate of corruption in the Western Countries. Italy is ranked 69th in the world for freedom of the press, a ranking lower than that of many countries of the Third World . Recently (two weeks ago) Italy has been expelled from the Group of Eight. **But**, the Italians still are very far from Self-criticism :

- 1) *hypocritically* they give all the blame to the so called “politicians” and not to themselves who have been voting for decades for those politicians ;
- 2) and they *schizophrenically* give all the blame to those politicians, while still continuing to vote for the same politicians of the past decades.

Another Italian Vice is Blind Pride, if I can so call it. Among Italians is widespread the despising of other peoples: we despise the immigrants from Eastern Europe, Asia, Africa and South America thinking of them as barbarians, criminals and parasites sucking our wealth; we despise the British thinking they are hypocrites, arid and materialist ; we despise the Americans thinking them as stupid, childish, crude and bullies; we despise the French pretending they are atheist, decadent, immoral; we despise the Germans because we pretend they are dull, obsessed, maniacal, authoritarian and selfish.

And there is Envy towards our most clever and deserving fellow citizens. Whoever is the cleverest at school, in his work place, in a union , in a political party, in a Catholic parish, because of Envy has been isolated , excluded from office, tasks, power, appointments. There is not admiration, praise, liking and solidarity for our best fellow citizens. The best persons are not imitated ,supported, followed. Besides the case of Croce I mentioned before in the field of culture, in the field of politics I want to mention Giuseppe Cofferati, Romano Prodi and Mario Monti.

Moreover, there are the Machiavellian Mind and Cunning Against Legality, vices which , for us Italians, work as a sort of “shooting ourselves in the foot”: we think ourselves smart because, when driving a car, we do not allow the pedestrians to cross the road on the zebra crossings: but every car driver in turn becomes a pedestrian in another moment! We think ourselves smart when we do not pay the due taxes, but the consequence is that the State or the Town Council, because of insufficient income, has not enough money and so cuts the number of teachers at school for our children, home care for our old parents, the hospital stay and medical care for us. We think ourselves smart always trying to go in front of the queue without respecting the rights of the person who came before us, but other people do the same against you when you queue. We think ourselves smart when we get our son/daughter hired as a public servant because of the unfair help from our brother in law, or friend, or boss or political leader, but afterwards , when an incompetent policeman shoots you instead of the criminal, or an incompetent doctor gives you a wrong diagnosis and therapy, it is you who are damaged by a public servant who has not been hired for his capacities.

In general there is Anti-Meritocracy: merits and capabilities are systematically ignored, that is we very rarely give a job, an office, a scholarship, a prize, an award to the person who displays more capability in this or that task. Thus the Family, the Party, the Union, the Parish, the Mafia, the Friend have the last (if not

the only) word in appointing people for positions in the university, in journalism, in show business, in social services, in the army and in several other departments of public service.

There is, then Distrust in the Spirit, Progress, Science, Future. An important example of this vice is this: the percentage of the Italian GDP assigned to Education is among the lowest in the EU. Other examples: the law forbids experiments in biomedical research; the law forbids nuclear energy ; wind and solar energy systems are few and without government subsidies; the percentage of balance which Italian private companies assign to Research & Development Departments is the lowest in the OCSE countries; the use of the internet by the people is the lowest in Western Europe.

Therefore, a deep and sclerotic Traditionalism pervades our people. I give you several heterogeneous examples of that: in our cinemas all foreign films are delivered dubbed in Italian; children remain in their parents' house until they are 30-35; Catholic parishes are tied to an immobile liturgy in which laymen/women have no active role, while the priest does everything (gospel reading, preach, prayers, choice of the hymns) by himself; immigrants are not given important jobs and offices both in public and private employment, therefore, even if in Italy now there are millions of immigrants, Italian society cannot be called really multicultural.

Moreover, there is Family-addiction, a sort of close and centripetal view of life , lacking the desire for and trust in for an encounter with the other people in open society. As I mentioned, people in their thirties are “parking” in their parents' house; the vast majority of Italian companies is both owned and managed by families.

Furthermore, there is Populist Extremism: demagogic and extremist political ideologies attract the Italian mind: Fascism (Twenties-Forties) , Communism (Forties- Nineties) , Berlusconiism (from the Nineties until nowadays) . Strong among us is the idea that the Majority is good in itself , and the minorities wicked in themselves and they should not be allowed to disagree; strong is the idea that analysis and dialogue between majority and the minorities are a waste of time, and, instead a Brave Leader should decide everything by himself, leaving free the Good People to enjoy the pleasures of the family and of the football championship.

Besides, there is the Lack of Courage: such as in the WWII we lost all the battles, so nowadays in our lives we are cowards and unable to stand for our rights at school as students, in a condominium as tenants, in an office as workers, unable to oppose the bullying misfits of the private companies as customers, and the bullying of the public bureaucracy as citizens . What appears to be “passionate character” to dreamy and idyllic observers *à la* Tim Parks, appears very differently in my life experience, and I would describe our character in this way : Strong toward the Weak, and Weak towards the Strong.

The Hopes of Italy

On the other hand, what can I say on Italian Virtues? In my opinion, the Italians are hard-working (I mean they do not fear working intensely and for a long time) and they are flexible (I mean they are able to face unexpected situations using understatement, adaptability, expertise and ingenuity).

What good things can Italy give to others? As Benedetto Croce wrote in his histories on 17th and 19th century Italy, the good we Italians had during the dark ages of our history were a few isolated , forgotten and sometimes persecuted intellectuals ; he mentioned Galileo Galilei and Giambattista Vico during the Spanish domination and Giuseppe Mazzini during the Austrian domination; I mention Croce himself during the Fascist period.

Where can Italy find its hopes? First of all, in my opinion, in the present pope, Francis. Because of the strong influence held by the Papacy in Italy, I think that this pope has the will and the determination to reverse the course followed by pope John Paul II, and to do that more than Benedict XVI – who started the reversal - could do. I believe Francis will try to reduce the greed for earthly power and selfish privileges of the Italian Catholic church which have been damaging and weakening the common good of the Italian State . Possibly he will also try to reduce the dead traditionalism in social habits concerning the moral duties of individuals and of families, which nowadays are warped and distorted and block the progress of the Italian society.

I find another hope, even if more uncertain, in the European Union : the inspiring example of civic virtues given to us by the Western Countries of this international community which – until now, at least – Italy still belongs to ; the economic and legal bonds which the Maastricht Treaties order upon the members of the community, and upon Italy as well; the viability for Italian citizens, and especially for the younger ones, to move freely both for tourism and for work towards more civilised countries... All these things can be a moral and intellectual nourishment for us Italians ! I said “more uncertain” because, sadly, the majority of the Italians are oriented towards voting for leaving the EU, if a referendum takes place.

A further hope , however paradoxical it can be, is this: the Italians will surely have to suffer and endure great and long-lasting pains (long-lasting! not “*l'espace d'un matin*”! in the passing of a morning), as a consequence of their great moral and political errors; however, I believe that these pains will be a sort of wake up call, a sort of cockerel crow after the too prolonged sleep, which can make us sober after drunkenness, and make us more humble and realistic after a long period of vicious and escapist pride . The emigration itself of more and more Italian youths to other Countries will be a difficult, painful and nonetheless healthy experience... as a teacher I have many former students of mine already emigrated abroad, for Australia alone I can count four of them!

Still I am aware that even if the pain and the wet blanket of disillusionment are necessary in order to change direction in someone's life, nevertheless they are not sufficient to do that: in order to obtain enough strength to implement life-change, we absolutely need another resource. I mean we need new and better ideas on what we have to do. As for this, my hope stays in the global media of communication : films at the cinema, tv series and the foreign news on the television, and most of all the world wide web, the internet. These global media are like open windows through which Italians (better said: those Italians who want to) can see, understand, appreciate and possibly follow other ideas and other human behaviours.

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