Perry Anderson

The Affinities of Norberto Bobbio

In early 1848, within a few weeks of each other, two antithetical texts were published in London, on the eve of European revolution. One was *The Communist Manifesto*, by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. The other was *Principles of Political Economy*, by John Stuart Mill. The former famously declared that the spectre of communism was haunting Europe, and would soon take possession of it. The latter, using the same imagery with scarcely less confidence, but in the opposite sense, dismissed socialist experiments as little more than chimeras that could never take on real shape as viable substitutes for private property.[1] The antithesis occasions little surprise for us now. Liberalism and Socialism have long been conventionally understood as antagonistic intellectual and political traditions; and with good reason, by virtue of both the apparent incompatibility of their theoretical starting-points—individual and societal, respectively—and of the actual record of conflict, often deadly, between the parties and movements inspired by each. However, at the very outset of this historical contention, it was strangely

short-circuited in the trajectory of Mill himself. The risings of the urban poor across the principal capitals of Europe and the bloody battles that followed them stirred a warm solidarity in Harriet Taylor, the object of his affections. He set himself to study with a newly opened mind doctrines of common ownership; and soon—indeed in the very same work, *Principles of Political Economy*, in its revised edition of 1849—pronounced the vision of socialists collectively to be 'one of the most valuable elements of human improvement now existing'.[2] Rarely has a fundamental political judgement been so rapidly and radically reversed. Thereafter, Mill always regarded himself as a liberal and a socialist; as he put it in his *Autobiography*, 'The social problem of the future we now considered to be how to unite the greatest individual liberty of action with a common ownership in the raw materials of the globe, and an equal participation of all in the benefits of combined labour.'[3] He defended the Paris Commune, and died working on a book on Socialism which he hoped would be more important than his study of Representative Government.

Liberal Approaches to Socialism

Mill's evolution, however striking, might be thought idiosyncratic or isolated. But it was not. There was to be a distinguished succession to it. England's most famous philosopher after Mill replicated the same movement. In 1895, Bertrand Russell wrote the first English-language study of German Social-Democracy, the leading party of the Second International, after a study trip to Berlin. While decidedly sympathetic to the more moderate aims of the SPD, 'the point of view from which I wrote the book'—he noted 70 years later—'was that of an orthodox liberal'.[4] At that time Russell deprecated what he called the 'boundless democracy' of the party's Erfurt Programme, and feared what he thought would be the 'foolish and disastrous experiments' that might ensue if it were not modified to respect 'natural inequalities'.[5] Within another two decades, he too had changed his mind thoroughly and permanently. It was the First World War which transformed his outlook, as 1848 had Mill's. The work he had planned to write jointly with D. H. Lawrence, *Principles of Social Reconstruction*, which appeared in 1916, if it contained caustic attacks on the state, private property and war, was still deemed insufficiently intransigent by Lawrence, then urging a

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[1] *Principles of Political Economy*, London 1848, Vol. I, p. 255. Mill's judgment specifically referred to Saint-Simonian schemes, which—as he explained—he regarded as the most serious form of socialism. In his autobiography he used the same phrase for his initial view of any socialism, which could only be 'reckoned chimerical': *Autobiography*, London 1873, p. 231.

[2] *Principles of Political Economy*, London 1849, Vol. I, p. 266. Of the several versions of socialism, Mill now decided that Fourierism was the most skilful and formidable variant, an opinion he held to the end of his life. Of the difference between the first and second editions of his work, Mill later wrote: 'In the first edition the difficulties of socialism were stated so strongly, that the tone was on the whole that of opposition to it. In the year or two which followed, much time was given to the study of the best Socialistic writers of the Continent, and to meditation and discussion on the whole range of topics involved in the controversy: and the result was that most of what had been written on the subject in the first edition was cancelled, and replaced by arguments and reflections of a more advanced character': *Autobiography*, pp. 234–235.

[3] *Autobiography*, p. 232.

[4] *German Social-Democracy*, London 1965 (re-edition), p. v.

[5] Ibid., pp. 141–143, 170.

'revolution' that would effect 'the nationalizing of all industries and means of communication, and of the land—in one fell blow'.[6] But Russell's next book, *Proposed Roads to Freedom*, written during his imprisonment for agitation against the war, was a full-scale discussion of Marxism, Anarchism and Syndicalism, which came out unequivocally for Guild Socialism as 'the best practicable system'—the form of common property he believed most conducive to individual liberty, as against the dangers of any too-powerful state.[7]

Another eminent contemporary who made the same transition was the economist J. A. Hobson. Best known at large for his work on *Imperialism*, because of Lenin's use and critique of it in his own later work on the subject, Hobson was a convinced English liberal when he published it in 1902. In his case too, it was the First World War which altered his course. By 1917, he was actually attacking West European Social-Democracy from the left, writing that: 'The patriotic stampede of socialism in every country in the summer of 1914 is as convincing a testimony to its inadequacy to the task of overthrowing capitalism as could possibly be given.'[8] After the war, Hobson devoted his best energies to developing a theory of the socialist economy that would combine the structural exigencies of standardized production for basic needs, with sectoral conditions for personal liberty and technical innovation. The economist of over-saving whose influence Keynes acknowledged in *The General Theory* was himself meanwhile writing a work entitled *From Capitalism to Socialism*.[9]

The United States provides a final example. There too, the country's major philosophical mind, John Dewey, a staunch and outspoken liberal throughout his long career, traced the same curve. In his case it was not the First World War[10] but the Great Depression which led him to trenchant conclusions. In his book *Liberalism and Social Action*, published in 1935, Dewey—noting the historical absence in America of the Benthamite, as opposed to Lockean, moment of what he took to be the historic liberal legacy—forthrightly denounced laissez-faire orthodoxies as 'apologetics for the existing economic regime' that masked its 'brutalities and inequities'. He went on, writing at the height of the New Deal: 'The control of the means of production by the few in legal possession

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[6] Ronald Clark, *The Life of Bertrand Russell*, London 1975, p. 263.

[7] *Proposed Roads to Freedom*, London 1919, pp. xi–xii, 211–212: 'The communal ownership of land and capital, which constitutes the characteristic doctrine of Socialism and Anarchistic Communism, is a necessary step toward the removal of the evils from which the world suffers at present and the creation of such a society as any humane man must wish to see realized.'

[8] *The Fight for Democracy*, Manchester 1917, p. 9.

[9] Hobson's discussion both of the reasons for, and the limits to, socialization of the means of production, has a strikingly modern ring: see *From Capitalism to Socialism*, London 1932, pp. 32–48.

[10] Dewey, after initially opposing US entry into the War, rallied to Wilson in 1917—against the bitter protest of such devoted pupils as Randolph Bourne. The cast of his *German Philosophy and Politics* (1915) in many ways recalls that of Thomas Mann's antithetical *Reflections of an Unpolitical Man* (1918) on the other side. In it Dewey, drawing on Heine's famous forebodings, sought to link German Idealism to German militarism—as against an American Experimentalism proper to US democracy. This *Kulturpatriotismus* was in some degree qualified by Dewey's concluding repudiation of the whole 'philosophy of isolated national sovereignty' and call for the creation of an international legislature beyond it. In the twenties, Dewey's extensive travels outside America contributed substantially to the broadening of his political sympathies.

operates as a standing agency of coercion of the many'—such coercion, backed by physical violence, being 'especially recurrent' in the US where in times of potential social change, 'our verbal and sentimental worship of the Constitution, with its guarantees of civil liberties of expression, publication and assemblage, readily goes overboard.' Dewey saw only one historical resolution for the tradition he continued to champion: 'The cause of liberalism will be lost,' he declared, 'if it is not prepared to socialize the forces of production now at hand', even—if necessary—resorting to 'intelligent force' to 'subdue and disarm the recalcitrant minority'. The aims of classical liberalism now required the achievement of socialism. For 'the socialized economy is the means of free individual development.'[11]

It is timely to recall these illustrious examples today, because after a major interval we are seeing a significant new range of attempts to synthesize liberal and socialist traditions. The later work of C.B. Macpherson, in particular *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy*, comes immediately to mind. The studied ambiguity of John Rawls's *Theory of Justice* can be—by some, has been—read as laying philosophical foundations for a similar project. More express in intention is Robert Dahl, recently advocate not only of political pluralism but also of economic democracy. A younger generation of Anglo-American writers has produced a series of works, differing in temper and purpose, but comparable in political inspiration: David Held's *Models of Democracy* and John Dunn's *Politics of Socialism* in England, Joshua Cohen and Joel Roger's *On Democracy* and Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis's *Capitalism and Democracy* in the USA. In France, Pierre Rosanvallon, among others, seeking to recover liberal traditions for the Second Left, has called for a reconsideration of the modern relevance, not just of De Tocqueville, but of Guizot too.[12]

I. Bobbio: Background, Career

In this current landscape there is one figure of outstanding moral and political significance, the Italian philosopher Norberto Bobbio.* Although perhaps the most influential political theorist of his own country, with a wide audience in Spain and Latin America as well, Bobbio has hitherto been relatively little known in the Anglo-Saxon world. It is to be hoped that the recent translation into English of two of his principal works—*Which Socialism?* and *The Future of Democracy*—

[11] *Liberalism and Social Action*, in John Dewey, *The Later Works, 1925–1953*, Vol XI, Carbondale—Edwardsville, Illinois 1987, pp. 22, 46; 61–62, 63.

[12] Note the clustering of dates: John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Cambridge, Mass. 1971; C.B. Macpherson, *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy*, Oxford 1977—then: Joshua Cohen and Joel Rogers, *On Democracy*, New York 1983; John Dunn, *The Politics of Socialism*, Cambridge 1984; Robert Dahl, *A Preface to Economic Democracy*, Berkeley 1985; Pierre Rosanvallon, *Le Moment Guizot*, Paris 1985; Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *Democracy and Capitalism*, New York 1986; David Held, *Models of Democracy*, Cambridge 1987.

* I would like to thank Fernando Quesada and his colleagues at the Instituto de Filosofia in Madrid, whose seminar on modern theorists of democracy in 1986 originally prompted reflections on Bobbio.

will alter this situation.[13] Any reflection on the relations between liberalism and socialism must take central stock of Bobbio's oeuvre. To understand this, however, something needs to be said of the life-experience behind it.

Norberto Bobbio was born in 1909 in Piedmont, and grew up in what he has described as a 'bourgeois-patriotic milieu', between 'those who had resisted fascism and those who had yielded to it'. He fell initially under the influence of Gentile, philosopher of the regime, and did not reject Mussolini's order at the outset.[14] His early training was in political philosophy and jurisprudence at the University of Turin between 1928 and 1931. At that time, he recalls, the names of Marx or Marxism were unknown in the lecture-room—less officially banned than regarded as intellectually dead and buried—and Bobbio's own outlook was largely formed by Croce's historicism, like that of many of his generation. At the same time, his teacher in the philosophy of law, Gioele Solari, sought to develop a 'social idealism' also inspired by Hegel, but one more progressive than Crocean doctrine in political sympathy. In due course, after doctoral work on German phenomenology, Bobbio came by the mid-thirties to form part of a Turinese intellectual milieu that was strongly liberal in conviction—descending directly from the memory of Piero Gobetti. This ambience provided the Piedmontese nucleus of *Giustizia e Libertà*, the anti-fascist organization founded by the Rosselli brothers in France. When its network fell to a police sweep in 1935, Bobbio was briefly arrested as a sympathizer. After his release, he taught at the universities of Camerino and then Siena before the Second World War. There, he joined the Liberal-Socialist movement formed in 1937 by Guido Calogero and Aldo Capitini, two philosophers at the Scuola Normale in Pisa. In 1940, he moved to the University of Padua, which was to become the heart of the Resistance in the Veneto. In the autumn of 1942, he helped found the *Partito d'Azione*, the political wing of the Resistance into which *Giustizia e Libertà* and the Liberal-Socialist movement converged. Now a member of the Committee of National Liberation in the Veneto, Bobbio was arrested a second time by Mussolini's regime in December 1943; he was released three months later.[15]

The following year, while fighting still raged in Northern Italy, Bobbio published a short polemical work entitled *The Philosophy of Decadentism—A Study of Existentialism*.[16] This text, a vehement denunciation of the

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[13] Polity Press, London 1987; each with a fine introduction by Richard Bellamy. Publisher and editor are to be congratulated on their appearance. Bellamy discusses Bobbio further in his *Modern Italian Social Theory*, London 1987, pp. 141–156. The original Italian editions were *Quale Socialismo?*, Turin 1976, and *Il Futuro della Democrazia*, Turin 1983. The English translation of the former includes further essays not collected in the Italian original. References below to the English editions are abbreviated to WS and FD; the translations have sometimes been modified. Bobbio's full oeuvre is enormous. Carlo Violi, *Norberto Bobbio: A Critical Bibliography*, Milan 1984, published in honour of his 75th birthday, contains over 650 items—themselves amounting to no more than some 60% of his production. Much of his work has been in the theory of law, which will scarcely be mentioned below.

[14] 'Cultura vecchia e politica nuova', in *Politica e Cultura*, Turin 1955, p. 198.

[15] See *Italia Civile. Ritratti e Testimonianze*, Florence 1986 (re-edition), pp. 70–71, 95–96, 170, 276–277; *Italia Fedele. Il Mondo de Gobetti*, Florence 1986, pp. 157–158; *Maestri e Compagni*, Florence 1984, p. 191. These three volumes of 'portraits and testimonies' contain much of Bobbio's most personal writing.

[16] An English translation was published by Oxford University Press in 1948.

aristocratism and individualism of Heidegger and Jaspers in the name of a democratic and social humanism, makes clear the impact on him of the labour movement that was the leading force in the Northern Resistance. Bobbio was later to explain: 'We abandoned decadentism, which was the ideological expression of a class in decline, because we were participating in the labour and in the hopes of a new class.' 'I am convinced,' he went on, 'that if we had not learnt from Marxism to see history from the point of view of the oppressed, gaining a new and immense perspective on the human world, there would have been no salvation for us.'[17] In speaking thus, Bobbio was describing a widespread reaction among the pleiad of younger intellectuals who had rallied to the *Partito d'Azione*. He himself was 'one of those who believed in the henceforward irresistible strength of the Communist Party'[18] and looked forward to common action between workers and intellectuals for a radical reform of the structures of the Italian state.

The avowed goal of such militants in the *Partito d'Azione* was precisely to realize a synthesis of liberalism and socialism. Since these had long been joint objects of fascist imprecations, it seemed logical to many of its thinkers to vindicate them together. In their eyes this would be the specific vocation of the *Partito d'Azione*, distinguishing it from the traditional parties of the working-class. After the Liberation, however, in spite of its distinguished military role during the Resistance and its rich intellectual endowment, the Party failed to win a durable position on the Italian political scene. After three years, it disappeared. No one has described the reasons for its eventual dissolution better than Bobbio himself, who—a decade later—wrote: 'We had clear and firm moral positions, but our political positions were subtle and dialectical—and therefore mobile and unstable, continually in search of an insertion in Italian political life. But we remained rootless in the Italian society of those years. Towards whom should we turn? Moralists above all, we advocated a complete renovation of Italian political life, beginning with its customs. But we thought that for such a renovation there was no need of a revolution. We were consequently rejected by the bourgeoisie, which wanted no renovation, and by the larger part of the proletariat, which did not want to renounce revolution. We were thus left tête-à-tête with the petty-bourgeoisie, which was the class least inclined to follow us—and we were not followed. In truth it was a rather painful spectacle to see us—the *enfants terribles* of Italian culture—thrown together with the most fearful and feeble layers of Italian society, minds in perpetual motion trying to make contact with the most slothful and withered mentalities, provokers of scandal winking complicitly at the most timorous and conformist of citizens, these super-intransigent moralists preaching to specialists in compromises. During the whole period in which the *Partito d'Azione*—leaders without an army—was active as a political movement, the Italian petty-bourgeoisie—an army

[17] 'Libertà e potere', in *Politica e Cultura*, p. 281.
[18] *Politica e Cultura*, p. 199.

without leaders—was indifferentist. You can imagine whether a marriage between the two was feasible. . .'[19]

Debates and Realignments

This judgement—hard and caustic—on the experience of the *Partito d'Azione* no doubt reflects the state of mind in which Bobbio withdrew from direct political involvement after the Party had dissolved itself in 1947, and he took up a chair in the philosophy of law at the University of Turin. But although devoting himself mainly to work in his academic field, he did not do so exclusively. For, in the following years, he wrote a series of eloquent articles criticizing the polarization of Italian political and intellectual life during the High Cold War. In them he courteously yet pointedly took issue with the ideologies of both official communism and anti-communism, the Congress for Cultural Freedom (from its inception), and the Partisans of Peace. His principal interlocutor, however, was the PCI. Bobbio's aim was to dissuade it from unconditional allegiance to a Soviet state that he numbered—'without being scandalized by the fact, since I hold that it reflects a hard historical necessity'—among totalitarian regimes;[20] and to persuade it of the permanent importance of liberal political institutions such as existed in the West. It is difficult to think of many other writers in Europe who achieved a tone of comparable civility and equanimity at that time.[21] The effect of these interventions was marginal until after the death of Stalin, when the changes in Russia started to loosen the ideological corsets of the Italian communist movement a little. It was then that Bobbio published, in 1954, an article entitled 'Democracy and Dictatorship', which had a more significant outcome. Its theme was a serene but severe critique of the traditional Marxist conceptions of these two terms, insisting on the historic underestimation by Marxism of the value of the liberal legacies of the separation and limitation of powers, yet predicting that the PCI would evolve towards a greater understanding and acceptance of these, 'essential for its cohabitation with the Western world', in the years to come.[22]

This summons provoked an extended response from the leading Communist philosopher of the time, Galvano Della Volpe, who reproached Bobbio with regressing to the positions of the moderate liberalism of Benjamin Constant in the early 19th century, and maintained that Marxism was by contrast the heir of the more radical democratic tradition of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, theorist of a *libertas major* as against Constant's *libertas minor*. Bobbio in turn replied to Della Volpe with a

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[19] 'Inchiesta sul Partito d'Azione', *Il Ponte*, VII, No 8, August 1951, p. 906. Paradoxically Togliatti's retrospective judgement of the Party, in response to the same questionnaire, was less severe—for he could write: 'In essence there were only two great currents of resistance and effective, durable struggle against fascist tyranny: one was led by us Communists, the other by the Action movement, and it is not even certain that ours was always and everywhere the stronger.' *Il Ponte*, VII, No 7, July 1951, p. 770.

[20] *Politica e Cultura*, p. 48—a volume which includes the principal interventions of this period: 'Invito al colloquio', 'Politica culturale e politica della cultura', 'Difesa della libertà', 'Pace e propaganda di pace', 'Libertà dell'arte e politica culturale', 'Intellettuali e vita politica in Italia', 'Spirito critico e impotenza politica'.

[21] Both Russell and Dewey lost their heads at the onset of the Cold War.

[22] *Politica e Cultura*, p. 149.

much longer essay than his original article, 'On Modern Liberty Compared with That of Posterity', in which he developed his argument and urged, in a friendly but firm tone, the Communists to beware of a 'too ardent progressivism' that risked sacrificing the conquests of an existing liberal democracy to the installation of a future proletarian dictatorship in the name of a perfected ulterior democracy. The weight of this second intervention was such that Palmiro Togliatti himself felt it necessary to respond to its arguments, under a pseudonym in *Rinascita*.[23] In his rejoinder to Togliatti's counter-arguments, Bobbio concluded with an autobiographical evocation and credo. Without a profound engagement with Marxism after the Liberation, he wrote, 'we would either have sought a haven in the refuge of interior life, or would have put ourselves at the service of the bosses. But, among those who were saved from these two fates, there were only a few of us who preserved a small bag in which, before throwing ourselves into the sea, we deposited for safekeeping the most salutary fruits of the European intellectual tradition, the value of enquiry, the ferment of doubt, a willingness to dialogue, a spirit of criticism, moderation of judgement, philological scruple, a sense of the complexity of things. Many, too many, deprived themselves of this baggage: they either abandoned it, considering it a useless weight; or they never possessed it, throwing themselves into the waters before having the time to acquire it. I do not reproach them; but I prefer the company of the others. Indeed, I suspect that this company is destined to grow, as the years bring wisdom and events shed new light on things.'[24]

The quiet confidence of the final sentence was going to prove justified, if only in the long run—as no doubt Bobbio intended it. In the short run, the episode of his debate with Della Volpe and Togliatti had little major repercussion in Italian political culture, remaining relatively neglected for the next twenty years. It was not a prelude to any immediate wider audience for Bobbio, who continued to work essentially within the university. In 1964, the ruling Christian Democratic Party embarked on a coalition with the Italian Socialist Party for the first time, once the latter had broken its links with the Communist Party. For six years, Italy was governed by the formula of the so-called Centre-Left. Much later, Bobbio would describe this experience as, for better or worse, 'the happiest moment of Italian political development' in the post-war period.[25] One may wonder whether Bobbio really felt much enthusiasm at the time for the lacklustre governments of those years. But one thing is certain. In 1968, Bobbio for the first time entered the recently merged Unitary Socialist Party—a reunification of Nenni's PSI and Saragat's Social-Democratic PSDI. What ensued? A massive popular upheaval broke out in the universities and factories of the country—the famous Italian 1968–69. The vote of the newly unified PSU—instead of increasing—fell precipitously. The Italian middle classes, taking fright at the new student and worker militancy, shifted rightwards and the Centre-Left rapidly expired. All Bobbio's subsequent

[23] Ibid., p. 194: the title of Bobbio's reply was, of course, a deliberately ironic reprise of Constant's famous essay of 1818, *De la Liberté des Anciens Comparée à celle des Modernes*.
[24] *Politica e Cultura*, pp. 281–282.
[25] 'La Crise Permanente', *Pouvoirs*, No 18, 1981, p. 6.

references to 1968–69 are tinged with reserve or bitterness. At the national level, his political calculation had been brusquely swept aside. At the same time, he had to confront the turbulence and disorder of the student rebellion in his own arena of professional activity.[26] He did not enjoy the experience, any more than the majority of his colleagues. The student assemblies of the time, in particular, seem to have shocked him a great deal, leaving disagreeable memories which can be read between the lines of the polemic which was going, in a subsequent phase of Italian politics, to make him a central figure of national debates for the first time.

This happened—could only happen—after the ebbing of the great social movements of the late sixties and early seventies. In late 1973, the Italian Communist Party proclaimed the goal of a strategic connubium with Christian Democracy—the so-called Historic Compromise—and the following year announced its general theoretical conversion to the principles of Eurocommunism. Twenty years after his debate with Togliatti, Bobbio's predictions were now fully vindicated. A political terrain finally favourable for his theses on democracy and dictatorship, liberalism and Marxism, had opened up. Taking advantage of the opportunity, Bobbio wrote in 1975 two key essays in *Mondoperaio*, the theoretical journal of the Socialist Party—the first on the lack of any political theory in Marxism, the second on the absence of any alternative to representative democracy as the political form of a free society, with a clear warning against what he saw as the dangers of delusions to the contrary in the revolutionary process then under way in Portugal.[27] This time, Bobbio's interventions aroused an enormous interest in the Italian public, and a large number of politicians and intellectuals replied to them, from both the PCI and the PSI. At the end of an extended debate, Bobbio could—a year later—congratulate himself on the consensus which he thought he could now discern around his basic emphases. By 1976, the PCI had formally renounced the Leninism he had once criticized, and was about to make striking electoral gains that he could welcome. The PSI, too, was adapting its traditions. With some satisfaction, Bobbio noted that Pietro Nenni himself was using his arguments officially from the tribune of the Fortieth Congress of the Socialist Party.[28] In 1978, fortified by this unfamiliar prestige, he collaborated in the drafting of the new programme of the PSI, defending it against those who taxed it with being very little Marxist. In the wake of this influence, Bobbio became a major columnist on national politics for *La Stampa*—his first regular journalistic, practice since the Liberation.

These were also the years which witnessed the rise of Bettino Craxi to the apex of the Socialist Party—initially in the name of a moral and political renovation of Italian Socialism, which would put it at the head

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[26] One of his own sons was moreover a leader of *Lotta Continua*, of which he later became the historian. See Luigi Bobbio, *Lotta Continua—Storia di una Organizzazione Rivoluzionaria*, Rome 1979, a dignified and thoughtful retrospect.

[27] 'Esiste una dottrina marxista dello stato?' and 'Quali alternative alla democrazia rappresentativa?', reprinted in *Quale Socialismo?*, Turin 1976, pp. 21–65, and now in WS, pp. 47–84.

[28] *Quale Socialismo?*, pp. 66–68; WS, pp. 86–87.

of struggles for a better civic and secular democracy in Italy. Bobbio, who like many in his party was suspicious of the corporatist logic of the Historic Compromise, seems to have shared the hopes of a libertarian remoulding of the PSI, and its potential role in a national renewal. Disappointment was not long in coming. The governments of 'National Solidarity' yielded not a harvest of reforms, but the tares of terrorism. Parliamentary instability and corruption did not diminish: by 1981, Bobbio was writing that for the purposes of understanding the realities of national politics 'the yellowed map of the Italian Constitution' could be thrown away.[29] The PSI under Craxi was becoming an increasingly cynical and authoritarian machine, subordinated to a cult of the Leader decked out with a 'decisionist' rhetoric borrowed at one remove from Carl Schmitt. The *pentapartito* regimes of the eighties, jumbling DC, PSI, PSDI, Republicans and Liberals together in 'an unwonted and hitherto unthinkable combination of the Centre-Right and the Centre-Left', he has regarded as designed to exclude any more progressive alternative, under US veto.[30] Today, Bobbio's position has once again become that of a more or less independent *franc-tireur*, today a Life Senator nominated by the President, a kind of honorific Italian peer, the moral conscience of the Italian political order.

II. Complexion, Location

Such has been, approximately, the *cursus vitae* of Norberto Bobbio—a life he once called 'a continual, slow, difficult apprenticeship: so difficult it has nearly always left me exhausted and unsatisfied, so slow that it is still not completed'.[31] What is its particular historical significance? Within the line of thinkers who have sought to reconcile liberalism and socialism, Bobbio differs from his principal predecessors in a number of important respects. One of these is simply the field of his special interests. Bobbio is a philosopher with a wide formation, who measured himself against the phenomenology of Husserl and Scheler before the war, the existentialism of Heidegger and Jaspers during the war, and the positivism of Carnap and Ayer after the war. His own epistemological preferences have always been empirical and scientific—going clean against the grain of what he dubs the 'Italian Ideology', congenitally speculative and idealist in bias.[32] In that respect he recalls Mill, Russell or Dewey. Unlike them, however, Bobbio is not an original philosopher of major stature; still less an economist, as were Mill and Hobson. But if he has made no comparable contribution to logic or epistemology, ethics or economics, his grasp of the principal traditions of Western political thought—from Plato and Aristotle to Aquinas or Althusius, Pufendorf and Grotius to Spinoza and Locke, Rousseau or Madison to Burke and Hegel, Constant and De Tocqueville to Weber or Kelsen—

[29] 'La Crise Permanente', p. 12. Given the importance Bobbio has always attached to constitutional norms, the judgement could scarcely be more drastic. Twenty years earlier he had co-authored a textbook of civic education expounding the Constitution for use in Italian high schools: Norberto Bobbio and Franco Pierandrei, *Introduzione alla Costituzione*, Bari 1960.

[30] 'a situation over which it is useless to drape a pious veil': 'Introduzione', *Il Sistema Politico Italiano tra Crisi e Innovazione*, Milan 1984, p. 21.

[31] *Italia Civile*, p. 10.

[32] *Profilo Ideologico del Novecento Italian*, Turin 1986, pp. 3–4. This work is Bobbio's major exercise in intellectual history: a brilliant, if often revealingly selective, survey.

is greater, not just in point of time but in scope and depth. Bobbio's command of political philosophy is backed by a training in constitutional law and familiarity with political science. One element of this professional engagement is of especial consequence for the character of Bobbio's work. He is much more at home with the history of Marxism than any of his immediate forerunners. His philological ease with the various traditions of historical materialism is not uniform. Marx as a classic he knows well; but if he is familiar with texts of Kautsky and Lenin, it is in a more superficial way, and when he speaks—for example—of Gramsci he can commit surprising errors. Paradoxically, however, this limitation can be deemed virtually an advantage in the context of the dominant culture of the Italian Left up to the seventies—a culture all but suffocated by its too exclusive and internal reference to Marxism, leading to just those abuses of the 'principle of authority' that Bobbio was to single out for criticism.[33] His knapsack of non- or pre-marxism, of which he spoke to Togliatti, kept him far from that, as did his transparently tolerant, sceptical and democratic temperament.

Another difference is that Bobbio's political coordinates are in some ways more complex than those of his principal predecessors. In effect, he stands at the cross-roads of three major contending traditions. By primordial formation and conviction he is a liberal. But Italian liberalism has always been a phenomenon apart, within the European set. In England, its nineteenth-century homeland, liberalism achieved a pure consummation in the minimal state and free trade of the Gladstonian epoch; thereafter—its historical vocation as it were fulfilled—it had little more to do than to pass over into its brief social epilogue under Asquith and Lloyd George, and expire as a political force. In France, on the other hand, liberalism as a doctrine was an expression of the Restoration, theorizing the virtues of a censitary monarchy; hegemonic under the Orleanist regime, mimicked under the Second Empire, it was thereby too compromised to survive the advent of a Third Republic based on untampered manhood suffrage. In Germany, notoriously, National Liberalism capitulated to Prussian conservatism under Bismarck, abandoning parliamentary principles for adhesion to military success against Austria; and after political abdication, it fell into economic disarray when free trade was subsequently discarded by the Second Reich. In Italy, however, by contrast with Germany, national unification was achieved not over the body but under the very banner of Liberalism. Moreover the liberalism that emerged victorious from the Risorgimento had a double legitimation: it was both the constitutional ideology of the Piedmontese Moderates, codifying the structure of their dominance under the monarchy, and the secular definition of an Italian State created against the will of the Roman Church.

This singular success acted as if to render for a long time the fulfilment of a normal liberal agenda superfluous in Italy. The name of liberalism was so thoroughly identified with the construction of the nation and the cause of the lay state that its leading statesmen and thinkers felt little pressure to improve electoral honesty or to further political liberty. This was the country where the oligarchic and manipulative regime of

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[33] *Quale Socialismo?*, p. 25; WS, p. 51.

Giovanni Giolitti, with its large dose of repressive violence and cooptive corruption, defined itself as Liberal down to the Great War; where the major theoretical mind of economic liberalism, Vilfredo Pareto, called for a white terror to crush the workers' movement and sweep away parliamentary democracy; where the greatest Italian philosopher, Benedetto Croce, paladin of his own ethical liberalism, exalted the massacres of the First World War, and approved Mussolini's investiture in power. Yet it was, amongst other things, deformations like these which ironically helped to preserve the vigour and future of Italian liberalism well into the twentieth century. In no country was the fate of liberalism so polymorphous and paradoxical. For precisely because its classical ideals were at once so extolled and burlesqued in Italy, they retained a radical normative power they had lost elsewhere, and would prove capable of entering into the most unexpected and combustible patterns in opposition to the established order. Bobbio is himself a testament to the ambiguity of this legacy. He treats the figures of Giolitti and Pareto with respect and admiration; that of Croce at times with near veneration.[34] The imprint of Crocean historicism, in particular, is very strong on one side of his thinking. Yet he also stresses the indifference of Croce's philosophical teleology to every institutional value of the political liberalism he holds dear, its all but complete irrelevance to the practical agenda of a modern democracy—which in his view has required an atemporal natural-rights foundation that was anathema to Croce.[35] For Bobbio's own liberalism is essentially a doctrine of constitutional guarantees for individual freedom and civic rights in the empirical tradition of Mill, which he associates especially with England; and his greater heroes in Italy have been those thinkers who could be regarded as close to it—the less representative figures of Carlo Cattaneo, who defended Milan against the Austrians in 1848, and Luigi Einaudi and Gaetano Salvemini, who did not truckle to fascism in 1924.

A Bouquet of Hybrids

Now in itself, of course, such an outlook—however eloquently expressed, as it is by Bobbio—has little that is original in the twentieth century. The whole interest of Bobbio's thought, however, derives from the confrontation of this classic political liberalism, mediated through the distinctive Italian experience, with two other theoretical traditions. The first of these is socialism; and here too the Italian context was formative. For Bobbio, when he came to the Left at the end of the thirties, entered an intellectual and political field that was already uniquely—so to speak—cross-pollinated. For in the kaleidoscopic conditions of Italian society after the First World War, in which so many social and ideological elements were shaken into unfamiliar patterns, liberalism did not fade but took on some new and startling colours. Italy produced in these years what is still the only full-scale scholarly study of European liberalism over the previous century, Guido de Ruggiero's *Storia del Liberalismo Europeo*—a work not only of comparative historical synthesis but also of embattled political engagement,

[34] 'One of the most complex and inspired and meditated visions of history of this century': *Italia Civile*, p. 92.

[35] See 'Benedetto Croce e il liberalismo', in *Politica e Cultura*, pp. 253–268.

completed as fascism consolidated itself in power. De Ruggiero, a historicist with a marked respect for the German contribution of Kant and Hegel to the European idea of a *Rechtsstaat*, was himself from the political centre. Yet he could write that 'if we remember the mean and inhuman harshness displayed by early nineteenth-century Liberals towards the urgent social problems of their times, we cannot deny that socialism, for all the defects of its ideology, has been an immense advance on the earlier individualism, and, from the point of view of history, has been justified in attempting to submerge it beneath its own social flood.'[36] Among a younger generation, further to the Left, the gravitational force of an insurgent working-class—and sometimes of the Russian Revolution beyond it—produced an astonishing array of different attempts to weld proletarian and liberal values into a new political force. The first and most famous of these was the programme for a 'Liberal Revolution' of Piero Gobetti, who published Mill in Italian and upheld free trade, yet admired Lenin and collaborated with Gramsci in *L'Ordine Nuovo*, before launching his own *Rivoluzione Liberale* in 1922. Gobetti's liberalism was one that called on workers to conquer power from below and become the new rulers of society, as the only class capable of transforming it. Seeing itself as revolutionary in the full sense of the word, it shunned Italian socialism as too reformist, and expressed every sympathy for Russian communism.

Gobetti died in France in 1926. Two years earlier, his journal had published an essay by a young socialist critical of the traditions of the PSI, Carlo Rosselli. In confinement under Mussolini, in 1928 Rosselli wrote a book entitled *Socialismo Liberale*—before escaping to France, where he founded the movement of *Giustizia e Libertà* the next year. Rosselli's project for a synthesis came from the opposite direction to that of Gobetti. Admiring what he thought he knew of British labourism, he sought to purge socialism of its Marxist heritage and Soviet incarnation, and to recover for it the traditions of liberal democracy he believed were fundamental conquests of modern civilization. Rosselli and his brother were assassinated by fascist thugs in 1937. In that year, Guido Calogero and Aldo Capitini created a distinct current they called *Liberal-socialismo* in Pisa. The slight nuance of its name indicated a position intermediate between that of Rosselli and Gobetti. Capitini, in particular, at once more religious in outlook and more sympathetic to the Soviet experience, aimed at a future social order that would be both 'post-christian' and 'post-communist', combining maximum legal and cultural liberty with maximum economic socialization. Calogero was closer to Rosselli, in a more philosophical idiom, rejecting Russia as a 'totalitarian' state and arguing against any general socialization of the means of production. When the two movements flowed into the *Partito d'Azione*

[36] *The History of European Liberalism*, Oxford 1927, p. 391; in a section entitled 'The Liberalism of Practical Socialism'. Bobbio's own feelings about De Ruggiero's work have been mixed. Confessing that it was once dear to him, he reproached it after the war with overestimating the value of German liberalism in general, and uncritically exalting the contribution of Hegel in particular—while, together with Croce, underestimating the achievements of English liberalism: 'What [the Italian idealists] could not perceive in the homeland of Milton and Mill, they imagined they had found in the country of Fichte and Bismarck': *Politica e Cultura*, pp. 253–256. Notwithstanding these objections, a number of Bobbio's own themes were anticipated by De Ruggiero, who during the Resistance was himself active in the formation and leadership of the *Partito d'Azione*.

in 1942, his advocacy of a mixed economy as the appropriate medium of a reconciliation of freedom and justice prevailed, and became part of the formal programme of the party. But it was contested within it by another current that described its goal—such were the possibilities of the time, and the country—as Liberal Communism. Its principal theorists, Augusto Monti and Silvio Trentin, were Gobetti's most direct descendants. From within *Giustizia e Libertà* in the 30's, Trentin had rejected the idea of a two-sector economy, and insisted on the need for a revolutionary socialization of property relations, while at the same time calling for a decentralized federative state—along Proudhonian lines—to safeguard liberty against the dangers of political despotism once capitalism was overthrown. For these thinkers, a communist revolution was anyway probable in post-war Italy, and the task was to think through the forms of the democratic revolution to come *afterwards*, that would historically 'right' it.[37]

Liberal Revolution, Socialist Liberalism, Liberal Socialism, Liberal Communism: has any other nation thrown up a range of such hybrids? They were possible in Italy because there had been no time for either bourgeois democracy or social democracy to set after the First World War, and establish a stable framework of demarcations for politics under capitalism. A decade of fascism meant that liberalism was still a peculiarly unconsummated force, while socialism became a relatively undivided one; and that together they confronted an enemy against whom resistance could in the last resort only be insurrectionary. In these conditions, the Italian Resistance could display every kind of generous syncretism. Bobbio is an heir of this exceptional moment, which was—he has often explained—the central political experience that shaped him.

Personally and morally closer to Capitini, his practical preferences were those of Calogero, although in his case they were combined with a lucid sense of the likely strength of the PCI after Liberation that would lead him—more or less inescapably—to a much deeper engagement with Marxist culture. Once a liberal, Bobbio in these years became a socialist. But like his Anglo-Saxon predecessors, he was not only a liberal before being a socialist, but preeminently remained one after being so. That liberalism derived from a profound commitment to the constitutional state, rather than from any particular attachment to the free market. It was political, not economic—a difference formulable more sharply in Italian than other languages, in the distinction (made most famously by Croce) between *liberalismo* and *liberismo*.[38] Hence it could permit an egalitarian passage to socialism. Explaining his own conception of the relation between the two, Bobbio wrote much later: 'I personally hold the socialist ideal higher than the liberal.' For, he argued, the former comprises the latter, but not vice-versa. 'While equality cannot be

[37] For this intricate history, see Bobbio's several accounts in *Italia Fedele*, pp. 9–31; *Italia Civile*, pp. 45–48, 249–266; *Maestri e Compagni*, pp. 239–299; *Profilo Ideologico*, pp. 151–163.

[38] Croce's essay *Liberalismo e Liberismo*, written in 1928 and directed against Einaudi, argued that liberty was a moral ideal compatible with a number of economic regimes—hence not to be identified with mere competition and free trade; a decade later he used the same arguments against Calogero to reject the notion of any possible synthesis between liberalism and socialism—'liberty suffers no adjectives'. In 1941 he refused to join the *Partito d'Azione* because it advocated distribution of land to the peasants in the South. See Giovanni Di Luna, *Storia del Partito d'Azione*, Milan 1982, p. 25.

defined in terms of liberty, there is at least one case in which liberty can be defined in terms of equality'—namely 'that condition in which all members of a society consider themselves *free* because they are *equal* in power'.[39] Socialism is therefore the more inclusive term.

The Contrast with Russell and Dewey

The logic of these convictions recalls Mill or Russell, Hobson or Dewey. What differentiates Bobbio's version of them is the historical experience out of which they spring. Unlike these earlier exemplars, Bobbio's bridge from liberalism to socialism was not a relatively isolated intellectual episode—it belonged to a collective movement that played a major political role in a time of civil and national war. The struggles, the passions, the memories behind it are far thicker. But just because these were so much more practically embodied, they were also more subject to the verdict of results. For Bobbio there was only one real, new ideology *of* the Italian Resistance—that of the *Partito d'Azione*, which he terms 'the party of liberal socialists'.[40] His nostalgia for the time of hope it represented recurs again and again in his texts. But it is always accompanied by the irony we have already seen. Liberal socialism was an 'elite formula', whose 'doctrinaire philosophical positions' were 'doomed to defeat by great, real political forces that were moved by very concrete interests and powerful drives rather than by perfect syllogisms'.[41]

The two principal such forces were, of course, Christian Democracy and Communism. Bobbio has never had much to say about the DC. It was the PCI that dominated his post-war horizon, in dialogue or polemic. The unusual political tenor of his exchanges with it, for the years of the Cold War, has been noted. These debates mark a historic divide that separates, in a fundamental way, his conjugation of liberalism and socialism from that of his predecessors. They were typically formed within a comfortably established liberalism and then reacted against its outrages or its failures—vindictive repression, imperialist war, mass unemployment—by seeking a socialism beyond it. Bobbio, by contrast, became a liberal and a socialist in something like a single impulse in the struggle against fascism, and then reacted against the crimes of established socialism—the system of Stalin's tyranny. To register this

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[39] *Le Ideologie e il Potere in Crisi*, Florence 1981, pp. 29–30. This volume is essentially a collection of Bobbio's articles in *La Stampa* between 1976 and 1980, texts in which he says—justly—that he 'nearly always tried to link problems of the day to general themes of political philosophy or political science'. They form a remarkable example of a kind of public prose that has all but disappeared in the European newspaper world.

[40] *Italia Fedele*, p. 248. There is a historical ellipsis in the description which suggests how important that synthesis was to him, to the point of a certain optical illusion. For the *Partito d'Azione* also contained a significant force that had little to do with socialism—drawn from banking and business circles and led by Ugo La Malfa, the post-war architect of a Republican Party that was to be politically close to enlightened industrial capital. Bobbio's memory of the *Partito d'Azione* regularly passes it over. In fact it was La Malfa's group, centred on the Banca Commerciale, which actually took the initiative in creating the Partito d'Azione—accepting the programmatic ideals of the Liberal Socialists only reluctantly and tactically; and which also survived the eventual break-up of the Party most effectively. See the excellent recent history by Giovanni De Luna, *Storia del Partito d'Azione*, pp. 35–42, 347–365.

[41] *Italia Fedele*, p. 248.

difference is not to minimize the seriousness of the engagement, in their time, of his two closest forerunners with the revolutionary experiences of the twentieth century. Russell wrote the most penetrating—often uncannily prophetic—study of the Bolshevik regime of the Civil War period by any foreign observer, after his visit to the USSR in 1920.[42] Dewey arrived to work in China a few days before the May 4th Movement, where he upheld the cause of the Canton government, attacking the role of British and Japanese imperialism in the country. He subsequently travelled to Turkey at the invitation of Kemal; to Mexico in the time of Calles, where he saw the realities of US imperialism—at work too in the Nicaragua of Sandino; and to Russia before the onset of collectivization. He wrote with sympathy about all of these.[43] In the late thirties, he famously and courageously helped to expose the Moscow Trials.

Nevertheless, such engagements were still in some sense honourable episodes rather than central preoccupations of men for whom, by background and native context, modern revolutionary movements inevitably remained somewhat remote. Bobbio, fresh from a Resistance movement whose leading force was the PCI, only a border away from the Yugoslav Revolution and little more from the newly created People's Democracies, in a country whose internal politics were a direct stake of the conflict between West and East, was in quite another historical situation. His engagement with socialism was necessarily of another order: at once far tenser and more intimate.

A Realist Preference

But there is also another element in the characteristic vision of Bobbio which separates him from his predecessors. One of the most striking common traits of the outlook of Mill, Russell and Dewey was their faith in the social power of education. The prospects of socialism hinged, for Mill, on a gradual cultural elevation of the working-classes which only long-term processes of education could accomplish—till then it would always be premature. Dewey's major influence in America derived, of course, from the Laboratory School he founded in Chicago, developing a rational-instrumental (as distinct from romantic-expressive) variant of progressive education; his best-seller in the US always remained *Democracy and Education*. Russell combined a joint pedagogic enterprise at Beacon Hill with extensive advocacy of its principles in *Education and the Social Order* and other writings.[44] In all three cases, the

[42] *The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism* (London 1920) is an astonishing text in the number and sharpness of its premonitions. Russell foresaw the likelihood of a nationalist and bureaucratic involution of the Bolshevik state, the future scale of its industrialization, and the probable limits to Third International strategies based on Russian experience in Western Europe; he even glimpsed something like a far-off balance of nuclear terror. His verdict on the Soviet experience is never quite coherent, and he had no really credible alternative for the labour movement in the West. But these failings weigh little against the achievement of the whole.

[43] Dewey described his time in China, on returning, as the most intellectually profitable of his life: it can be seen as one kind of watershed in his development. For his responses to the upheavals of the twenties, see his *Impressions of Soviet Russia and the Revolutionary World: Mexico-China-Turkey*, New York 1929, especially the chapter 'Imperialism Is Easy', pp. 181 ff. Russell crossed paths with Dewey in Hunan and Peking in 1921: see his own work *The Problem of China*, London 1922, p. 224.

[44] Russell's book appeared in 1932; Dewey published a text with the very same title in 1936.

sovereign importance ascribed to education was linked to a particular conception of the intellectual as potentially exemplary educator.

Bobbio, on the other hand, has expressly rejected any such role for intellectuals—deeming it, indeed, the characteristic mirage of pre-war Italian thinkers, uniting such diverse figures as Croce, Salvemini, Gentile, Gobetti, Prezzolini and Gramsci himself in a common delusion that their task was to 'educate the nation'.[45] His sceptical reserve towards programmes of 'intellectual and moral reform', or overly ingenuous hopes in *Bildung*, is conversely accompanied by a marked respect for that tradition of 'political realism' which has been especially concerned with the role of power and violence in history. Its influence on Bobbio has been deep. This tradition, he observes, has nearly always been a conservative one.[46] In Europe, its supreme philosophical exponents were Hobbes, theorist *par excellence* of absolutism, for whom the law without a sword was but paper; and Hegel, for whom sovereignty was tested not so much in the enforcement of internal peace as in the prosecution of external war—the perpetual medium of the life of nations. In Italy this realism took the form not of a speculative rationalization but a terrestrial exploration of the mechanics of domination, from Machiavelli to Mosca and Pareto. Bobbio has been a close and appreciative commentator of his country's elite theorists, to whom he owes certain significant elements of his sociological outlook.[47] But there is a sense in which his appropriation of the realist legacy has taken its distance from, or rather inflected, the specifically Italian tradition. For the latter has characteristically tended to issue into an obsessive culture of pure politics—that is to say, of politics conceived as a sheer subjective contest for power *per se*, as Machiavelli himself essentially saw it. What that tradition has lacked, by contrast, is a real sense of the State—as an impersonal and objective complex of institutions. The reasons for this deficit are fairly evident—the long absence, and later persistent weakness, of an Italian national state. The originality of Bobbio's own reception of the Italian realist tradition has lain in his firm reorientation of it away from politics as such—the intricate mechanisms for gaining or losing power which so fascinated Machiavelli or Mosca, or even Gramsci (and in degraded daily detail the country's parliament and press to this day)—and towards the questions of the State which preoccupied far more Madison, Hegel or De Tocqueville.

There are two fixed points of the reflections on the State that follow. The first is Bobbio's unwavering insistence that all states rest in the last resort on force.[48] For him this is the great, pessimistic lesson of conservative realism. It was shared, he notes, by Marx and Lenin. But they combined a pessimistic view of the state with an optimistic view

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[45] 'Le Colpe dei Padri', *Il Ponte*, XXX, No 6, June 1974, pp. 664–667; *Profilo Ideologico del Novenceto Italiano*, pp. 3–4. Bobbio traces the specificially Italian version of this idea back to Gioberti's legacy to the Risorgimento.

[46] Bobbio develops this theme in many texts. See, among others, *Saggi sulla Scienza Politica in Italia*, Bari 1969, pp. 9, 197, 217; *Profilo Ideologico del Novecento Italiano*, p. 17.

[47] See in particular his assessments of Pareto and Mosca in *Saggi sulla Scienza Politica*, published at the height of the student risings, against whose illusions Bobbio intimated they should serve as a salutary antidote: p. 252.

[48] *Le Ideologie e il Potere in Crisi*, p. 165.

of human nature, that allowed the prospect of an eventual elimination of the one by an emancipation of the other—whereas for the mainstream realist tradition the incorrigibility of the passions required the permanent duress of organized power to restrain them.[49] Bobbio, without pronouncing directly on this question, remarks that in general 'political studies owe more to the sometimes ruthless insights of conservatives than to the rigorous but brittle constructions of reformers.'[50] His second emphasis does in fact uphold a conservative against a Marxist tradition. It falls on the irreducibly violent potential of inter-state relations, beyond all internal regulation, as constitutive of the nature of political sovereignty as such. Precisely in so far as the logic of war is thus independent of domestic class relations, it has been neglected by Marxism to its peril. The history and theory of military conflict are for Bobbio—as much as for Hegel or Treitschke—necessarily integral to any realistic reflection on the state. Paradoxically, it is just this sense of the centrality of war for the destiny of politics that has also made Bobbio—quite exceptionally in his country—a steadfast opponent of the nuclear arms race, who yet advocates a Hobbesian formula for international peace.[51] Contrasting his outlook with traditions that descend either from Spencer or Marx, Bobbio expressly disavows any belief in the necessity of progress—here less than anywhere. On the whole history reveals not so much the ruse of reason—unintended good coming out of intended evil—as the malignity of unreason—unintended evil let loose by intended good.[52] Acknowledging in their place the claims of even a thinker like De Maistre, Bobbio's thought is a liberalism simultaneously open to socialist and conservative, revolutionary and counter-revolutionary, discourses.

III. Actually Existing Democracy: Two Critiques

What, then, has been the pattern of Bobbio's theoretical interventions over the last thirty years? The guiding thread of his writing in this period has been a defence and illustration of democracy as such. That democracy he defines procedurally rather than substantively. What are the criteria of Bobbio's democracy? Essentially, there are four. Firstly, equal and universal adult suffrage; secondly, civic rights which assure the free expression of opinions and the free organization of currents of opinion; thirdly, decisions taken by a numerical majority; and fourthly, guarantees of the rights of minorities against any abuses on the part of majorities. Defined in this way, Bobbio insists tirelessly, democracy is a method, the form of a political community, not its substance. But it is no less transcendent a historical value for that. Marxism, he argues, has always committed the fundamental error of underestimating it, in

[49] *Stato, Governo, Societa*, Turin 1985, pp. 119–125; *Quale Socialismo?*, pp. 39–40; WS, pp. 62–63, 187–190.
[50] *Saggi sulla Scienza Politica*, p. 217.
[51] That is, the investment of a monopoly of armed force in a single super-state with global jurisdiction. Bobbio contrasts this 'juridical' solution with what he terms the 'social' solution classically envisaged by Marxism, in which international peace is assured by the disappearance of the state. He does not maintain that it would amount to a general pacification of social relations, since the state remains an 'institutionalization of violence'; only that it would provide the conditions for the elimination of nuclear weapons, which call for an unconditional conscientious objection today, together with a rejection of the theory of deterrence that justifies them. See *Il Problema della Guerra e le Vie della Pace*, Bologna 1979, esp. pp. 8–10, 21–50, 79–82, 114–116, 202–206.
[52] *Quale Socialismo?*, pp. 102; WS, pp. 115, 209–212.

so far as historical materialism has been concerned with another question altogether: that of who rules in a given society, not of how they rule. For Marx and Lenin, this second problematic—what Bobbio calls the problem of the subjects, rather than the institutions, of power—obscured the first completely, to the point of generating a fatal confusion between dictatorship understood as any domination by one part or class of a society over another, and dictatorship understood as the exercise of political force exempt from any law—in Lenin's famous definition; that is to say, between two wholly different meanings of the term—as a social order in a generic sense, and as a political regime in a narrower sense.[53] Bobbio observes that there was a pre-Marxist tradition which accepted the necessity of a revolutionary dictatorship to change society—one that extends from Babeuf to Buonarrotti through to Blanqui. What was new in Marxism was its transformation of this classical notion of dictatorship—as a government at once exceptional and ephemeral, as the Romans conceived it—into the universal and unalterable substance of all governments prior to the advent of communism, that is of a classless society.

Against this theoretical conflation, Bobbio underlines the irreplaceable importance of the emergence of liberal institutions—parliaments and civic liberties—within what is indeed a class society, dominated by a capitalist stratum, but one that exercises its dominion within a regulative framework guaranteeing certain basic freedoms to all individuals, whatever their class. This political democracy represents, historically and juridically, an indispensable bulwark against abuses of power. Liberal in its origins in the previous century, it continues to be liberal in its institutional format in this century. 'When I use the term liberal democracy,' he writes, 'it is not in a limitative sense'—since there could be no such thing as a non-liberal democracy—but to denote 'the only possible form of an effective democracy'.[54] The essential function of such a democracy is to assure the negative freedom of citizens from the prepotence—actual or possible—of the State: their ability to do what they like without external legal impediment. The mechanisms of this guarantee are dual—and structurally indissociable: on the one hand civic rights at the level of the individual, on the other a representative assembly at the level of the nation. The nexus between the two constitutes what Bobbio calls the irreducible nucleus of the Constitutional State, whatever the exact suffrage obtaining in the different epochs of its existence. As such it forms a legacy that can be utilized by any social class. Its historical origin, Bobbio argues, is as irrelevant to its contemporary usage as is that of any technological instrument, be it the railway or the telephone. There are no grounds why the working-class cannot appropriate this complex in its own construction of socialism, and it has the most compelling reason for doing so. For in Bobbio's view, as he puts it in a deliberately pointed echo of tenets of historical materialism, 'liberal institutions belong to that material culture whose techniques it is essential to transmit from one civilization to another.'[55]

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[53] *Politica e Cultura*, pp. 150–152.

[54] Ibid., p. 178.

[55] Ibid., pp. 153–154, 142.

In his exchanges with Della Volpe and Togliatti, Bobbio naturally had no difficulty demonstrating the contrast between this liberal institutional nexus and the state of affairs in the Soviet Union, where a dictatorship of the proletariat was proclaimed—for him a dictatorship *tout court*, complete with 'the phenomenology of despotism of all times', the contrary of any kind of democracy.[56] But this initial contrast has encompassed only half of his polemical intent. For liberal democracy had in the course of time also to be distinguished and defended against another enemy, or at any rate another model. What was that? Liberal democracy, Bobbio has always insisted, is necessarily representative or indirect. The only alternative formally conceivable to it, therefore, would be a delegated or more direct democracy. By the seventies, there were few defenders of dictatorship—supposedly proletarian or otherwise—in Italy. But those who believed that a more direct form of democracy than the prevailing parliamentary order was possible and desirable were not so few. They looked forward to a conciliar democracy that would be as structurally proper to an advanced socialism as representative democracy was to advanced capitalism. The real target of Bobbio's theoretical interventions between 1975 and 1978 were these. His central attack was directed against what he called the 'fetish' of direct democracy. He did not deny the long pedigree of this idea from Antiquity through to Rousseau, before it was integrated into the tradition of historical materialism. But he rejected its validity or applicability to the industrial societies of today.

What are his arguments against it? They are two-fold—structural and institutional. On general historical grounds, Bobbio reiterates the familiar case that the sheer scale and complexity of modern states preclude *ab initio* direct popular participation in national decision-making, as a technical possibility. This does not mean, he goes on, that he therefore regards the existing representative state as the *ne plus ultra* of democratic evolution. Representative democracy and direct democracy are not antitheses, but compose a continuum of forms. In this continuum, 'there is no form which is good or bad in an absolute sense, but each is good or bad according to the time, the place, the issues, the agents.'[57] Such contextualization would seem to qualify the starkness of the initial contrast Bobbio makes between representative and direct democracy. But in practice, he criticizes or rejects every specific institutional form of direct democracy that he discusses. Firstly, referenda—the principal element of such democracy in the post-war Italian Constitution, which distinguishes it from more conservative counterparts elsewhere in Western Europe—may be tolerable for infrequent consultations of public opinion when the latter is divided into two more or less equal parts over some large and simple problem. But they are completely unsuitable for the bulk of legislative work, which far exceeds the capacity of the ordinary citizen to sustain an interest in public affairs—for voters cannot decide on a new law every day, as must the Italian Chamber of Deputies. Moreover, in referenda—

[56] Ibid., p. 157.

[57] *Quale Socialismo?*, p. 98; WS, p. 112.

Bobbio avers—the electorate is atomized, deprived of its normal guides or mediators in the shape of political parties. He has therefore deplored their multiplication in recent years.[58]

Nor are popular assemblies—as Rousseau once conceived them—viable either, as mechanisms of a direct democracy in modern societies. Practicable at best in small city-states of Antiquity, such bodies are physically impossible in contemporary nation-states with their millions of members. Moreover, even where they have briefly functioned at local level, in small settings, they have all too often proved easily distortable by demagogy or charisma, as the sad experience of the student movement demonstrated. Revocable mandates, for their part—a pivotal element in the conception of a more direct democracy for Marx or Lenin—are actively nefarious, for they are historically typical, Bobbio maintains, of autocracies in which the tyrant can dismiss his functionaries at any moment. Their positive complement, the imperative mandate, on the other hand exists *de facto* in modern European parliamentarism, in the form of the iron discipline of parties over their deputies, and as such is a weak point, to be lamented, of the democracy that already exists, rather than a strong point of any future democracy. The very notion of a binding mandate, for Bobbio, is incompatible with the principle that deputies represent general rather than sectoral interests which he holds to be essential to parliamentary democracy.[59] Thus his allowance that elements of direct democracy could be integrated as complements into representative institutions is largely nominal. The only actual example he mentions with approval is a faculty meeting. The spirit of his position is expressed in dismissals of the very idea of direct democracy by Bernstein and Kautsky that he cites as inspirations for his own vision of the problem.[60]

Unfulfilled Promises and Democracy's Isolation

Defence of representative democracy; critique of direct democracy; rejection of revolutionary dictatorship. In its general lines, Bobbio's themes could so far be compared to the doctrine of any lucid liberal, or read as a more or less unconditional adhesion to the Western status quo. Where does his non-conformism begin, not to speak of his socialism? It is to be found in his critique of the representative democracy which we have—and which he otherwise lauds. Here is where the really neuralgic point of Bobbio's thought lies, where the intellectual tensions which permeate and confer on it all its political and theoretical interest can be most clearly seen. For on the one hand Bobbio enumerates a series of objective processes which, according to him, tend to diminish and undermine representative democracy as he himself prizes it: that is, the classical schema of a liberal-constitutional state based on universal adult suffrage, the pattern which became generalized throughout the whole advanced capitalist zone after the Second World

[58] *Quale Socialismo?*, p. 59; WS, p. 79; 'La Crise Permanente', pp. 10–11, where Bobbio describes the 'burst' of referenda in the seventies as culpable of 'lèse-democracy'.
[59] *Quale Socialismo?*, p. 59–62; WS, pp. 80–82.
[60] *Il Futuro della Democrazia*, p. 34–41; FD, pp. 47–52; *Quale Socialismo?*, pp. 94–95; WS, pp. 109–110.

War. What are these growing obstacles to the operation of representative democracy? They can be summarized approximately as follows.

In the first place, the autonomy of the individual citizen has been completely eclipsed by the predominance of large-scale organization. The size and complexity of modern industrial societies necessarily renders impracticable the kind of composition of individual wills into a collective will postulated by classic liberal-democratic thought. In its stead there emerges a conflict of consolidated and oligarchic groupings whose interplay—whether at the party-political, or the socio-economic level—typically takes the form of a corporative bargaining that undermines the very principle of free representation as it was understood by Burke or Mill. The entry of the masses into the political system, with the advent of universal suffrage, has not counteracted these tendencies. Rather it has itself fatally generated a hypertrophied bureaucracy in the State, that is the outcome of justified popular pressures for the creation of welfare and social security administrations, which then paradoxically become ever more cumbersome and impermeable by any democratic control. Meanwhile, the technological advances of the Western economies make their governmental coordination and direction constantly more complex and specialized a function. The result is to open up an unbridgeable gulf between the competence—or rather incompetence—of the overwhelming majority of citizens in this area, and the qualifications of those few who alone know something of the matter: hence the constitution of a technocracy is inevitable. For their part, moreover, the citizens of the Western democracies tend to sink ever deeper into civic ignorance and apathy; one carefully maintained by the dominant media of commercial distraction and political manipulation. The consequence is that the actual electors evolve towards exactly the opposite of the well-educated and politically active subjects which should have been the human base of an operative democracy, in the eyes of the classical theorists of liberalism. Finally—here Bobbio rejoins a general refrain of the seventies—the combination of multiple corporative pressures, intractable weight of bureaucracy, isolation of technocrats, massification of citizenry, is an 'overload' of criss-crossing demands on the political system that sabotages its capacity to take effective decisions, leading to its growing paralysis and discredit.[61]

Such is the first line of criticisms Bobbio levels at our political order today. He sums up the gravamen of his charges by speaking of the 'unfulfilled promises' of representative democracy—expectations of liberty it has been unable to honour. But at the same time he insists that these promises could never have been redeemed. For the historical obstacles against which they were dashed have not been contingent. To Bobbio all the processes he enumerates so unsparingly, that have thwarted the hopes of the classical theorists of liberal democracy, are implacable—so many objective transformations of our conditions of social coexistence from which none can escape. They are, so to speak, *necessary* deficiencies of established representative democracy.

[61] See *Il Futuro della Democrazia*, pp. 10–24; FD pp. 28–39: Bobbio's discussion is in some ways less well articulated than usual here—there is not, in fact, analytically much distinction between his 'unfulfilled promises' and his 'unforeseen obstacles'.

But at the same time, on occasion in the same texts, Bobbio advances a series of criticisms of this democracy whose effect is diametrically opposite. Here his objection to contemporary parliamentary democracy is not promises it has failed to keep, but ones it has never given. For what Bobbio notes in this register is the general absence of any democracy in Western societies outside the precinct of legislative institutions themselves. Parliaments are held on either side in a rigid structural halter. On the one hand, the state itself comprises administrative apparatuses of a profoundly authoritarian character which, as he puts it, typically pre-existed the arrival of representative democracy and continue in large measure to be recalcitrant to it. 'What we call for the sake of brevity the "representative state" has always had to reckon with the existence of an administrative state which obeys a completely different logic of power, that descends from above rather than ascends from below, that is secret rather than public, based on hierarchy rather than autonomy'—and 'the first has never been able to make the second wholly submit to it.'[62] Army, bureaucracy and secret services constitute the occult underside of parliamentary democracy. 'Even the best Constitution shows only the facade of the huge, complicated edifice of the contemporary state. It reveals little or nothing of what is behind or within it. Not to speak of the cellars below it.'[63]

Outside the state, moreover, the characteristic institutions of civil society exhibit a virtually uniform lack of democracy. Representative principles occupy a relatively small space in social life as a whole. In factories, schools, churches or families, autocracy of one kind or another continues to be the rule. Bobbio does not treat the absence of democracy in these as of interchangeable significance. His emphases are those of classical Marxism. Remarking that 'the institutions the citizen succeeds in controlling are increasingly fictitious as centres of power', he writes that 'the various centres of power of a modern state, such as big business, or the major instruments of real power, like the army and bureaucracy, are subject to no democratic control';[64] 'the process of democratization has not even begun to scratch the surface of the two great blocks of descending and hierarchical power in every complex society, large corporations and public administration.'[65] His overall verdict on the balance of powers within the Western order is unequivocal: 'Even in a democratic society, autocratic power is far more widespread than democratic power.'[66]

To remedy these autocratic patterns, Bobbio advocates a democratization of social life at large. By this he means primarily the spread of principles of a representative rather than a direct democracy: that is to say, the extension of rights of free organization and decision now confined to the political ballot to the basic cells of the daily existence—work, education, leisure, home—of the citizenry, wherever this extension is practicable. 'The present problem of democracy,' he writes, 'no

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[62] *Quale Socialismo?*, p. 63; WS, pp. 82–83.
[63] *Le Ideologie e il Potere in Crisi*, p. 170.
[64] *Quale Socialismo?*, p. 17; WS, p. 43.
[65] *Il Futuro della Democrazia*, p. 47; FD, p. 57.
[66] *Quale Socialismo?*, p. 100; WS, p. 113.

longer concerns "who" votes, but "where" we vote.'[67] To pose this second question is not utopian today, for Bobbio argues that social development itself tends towards its resolution. Thus he writes that 'we are witnessing the extension of the process of democratization'—one in which 'quite traditional forms of democracy, such as representative democracy, are infiltrating new spaces, occupied till now by hierarchical or bureaucratic organizations.' In these circumstances, he remarks, 'I believe it is justified to talk of a genuine turning-point in the evolution of democratic institutions.'[68]

The Unresolved Antinomy

Now the contradiction—the fundamental incompatibility—of this register of Bobbio's thought with the previous one is patent. Here he insists on *unnecessary* deficiencies or limits of representative democracy. That is, he dwells on deficiencies which he presents as potentially superable by means of an extension of democratic principles themselves, beyond their existing boundaries—deeper into the state and across into civil society. There can be no doubt of the sincerity of his proposals here. But how can such a critique be relevant to a political order which cannot even realize its own principles *within* their current limits—and not for any want of subjective will, but under the weight of irresistible objective pressures? *Either* representative democracy is fatally destined to a contraction of its substance; *or* it is potentially amenable to an amplification of that substance. Both cannot be true at the same time. On occasion Bobbio seems to sense this and tries to soften the difficulty with formulas like: 'we seek ever more democracy in conditions that are ever worse for obtaining it.'[69] But such awareness is fleeting. On the whole Bobbio does not seem really conscious of how radical and central the contradiction is for his discourse as a whole. The basic antinomy of his theory of democracy never becomes the direct object of a reflexion on its meaning.

How are we to explain this? The answer seems to be that the contradiction is precisely the involuntary result of Bobbio's peculiar position at the confluence of the three diverse currents of thought discussed above. In effect, what happens is that he subjects his preferred ideal—liberal democracy—to two opposite and antagonistic kinds of criticism. The first of these is conservative: in the name of a sociological realism indebted to Pareto and Weber, it points out all those factors which pitilessly tend to evacuate the representative state of its vitality and worth, rendering it ever more a disappointing shadow of itself. The second is socialist: in the name of a conception of human (and not just political) emancipation derived from Marx, it points out all the areas of autocratic power in capitalist societies which the representative state leaves completely untouched, thereby depriving itself of the only social bases that would convert it into a true popular sovereignty. Bobbio cumulates the two conceptions, without being able to synthesize them. In reality, they are irreconcilable.

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[67] *Quale Socialismo?*, p. 100; WS, p. 114.
[68] *Il Futuro della Democrazia*, pp. 43–45; FD, pp. 54–56.
[69] *Quale Socialismo?*, p. 46; WS, p. 69.

If that is so, we might suppose that Bobbio himself would not be able to maintain an equilibrium between the two—the temptation of a conservative realism and the solicitation of a socialist radicalism. To see the upshot of his thought here, it is necessary to put to him the question that provides the title of one of his major essays. Which socialism, finally, does Norberto Bobbio stand for? At first sight, the answer seems obvious enough—a moderate social-democracy. Bobbio himself virtually proposes such a definition. A recurrent theme of his writing has been a contrast between the benefits Northern Europe has enjoyed from effective reforming government by social-democracy, in contrast to the woes Italy has incurred from the divisions of a labour movement unable to challenge the arrogance and corruption of Christian-Democratic hegemony. In the fifties Bobbio invoked the positive experience of the Attlee administration in Britain indirectly against the PCI.[70] In the sixties he depicted the formative period of Italian politics after the First World War as a time of tragic extremism in which the opposed but related forces of the subversive right and the subversive left overwhelmed the better impulses of moderate conservatism and moderate reformism, with disastrous consequences for Italian democracy.[71] In the seventies he criticized the PCI's formal advocacy of a 'Third Way' between Stalinism and social-democracy as strategically empty rhetoric, that served only to conceal the need for a clear-cut choice between dictatorial and democratic methods of social change—which between them exhausted the range of possible options. Declarations of Italian particularity as the basis for a superior Third Road were intellectual presumption, as if this backward country—whose relevant peculiarities were only the mafia, official corruption, tax evasion, bureaucratic ineptitude and clientelism, black economy and terrorism—could give lessons to the more modern societies of Europe.[72] In reality, Bobbio commented, ceremonial discourses apart, 'how can the practice to date of the two major parties of the Italian left be described other than as, in the most benevolent of hypotheses, social-democratic?'—'I say benevolent because to tell the truth, compared with the practice of the more advanced social-democratic parties, the Centre-Left already experienced and the Historical Compromise merely proposed can only be described the one as a makeshift and the other as a retreat.' He concluded his verdict on the Third Way of the Berlinguer years with these words: 'Once Leninism is excluded as inapplicable in advanced societies, that are anyway so different from Russia or China as to be incomparable, I frankly do not see how the Italian labour movement can avoid flowing into the great river of Social-Democracy, abandoning the fascinating but inscrutable project of digging out a bed of its own—where the current would in all probability be weak in impetus and short in course.'[73]

Bobbio's endorsement of social-democracy, apparently unambiguous in this judgement, nevertheless expressly concerns methods rather than aims. It does not underwrite the kind of society over which social-

[70] *Politica e Cultura*, p. 150.
[71] *Profilo Ideologico*, pp. 114–115.
[72] *Le Ideologie e il Potere*, pp. 124–125.
[73] Ibid., pp. 126–127.

democracy has so far presided in the West, and does not exclude the possibility of a third—for that matter, he notes, a fourth or fifth—model of society, alternative and preferable to the two antagonistic models now existing, as distinct from a third route towards one. The essential point is that any advance towards socialism in countries with liberal institutions must preserve them and proceed through them. Bobbio's historical realism prevents him from denying that there have been other roads to the overcoming of capitalism in other periods or other zones. Democracy is not a supra-historical value. 'The democratic method is a precious possession, but it is not appropriate for all times and all places.' In particular there may be situations of emergency or revolutionary upheaval, 'violent transitions from one order to another', where it is inapplicable.[74] Bobbin is under no illusions that the liberal order itself came into existence liberally. It was forged in 'a harsh struggle' against the *anciens régimes* by a 'minority of intellectuals and revolutionaries'—its founding episode the 'bloody outcome' of the 'pullulation of religious sects and political movements' in the English Civil War.[75] Likewise the basis of the democratic order that eventually succeeded it, the majority rule first glimpsed by the Levellers, 'did not generally itself have its genesis in the decision of a majority'.[76] Bobbio's capacity to register the insurgent origins of the *Rechtsstaat*, or the coercive matrix of a consensual democracy, is not just a token of his freedom from *bien-pensant* pieties of a conventional kind. It reflects that strain of his realism which derives from the tradition of the Italian elite theorists. Although this tradition started in the saturnine guise of the conservatism of Mosca and Pareto, it moved in the next generation into the hands of moderate democrats—men like Burzio and Salvemini, from whom Bobbio assimilated it without qualms. 'What regime is not the fruit of conscious and organized vanguards?' he once asked a Communist interlocutor.[77] 'Qualitative changes in history, or revolutionary processes, are the work of minorities.'[78]

Roads to Socialism

But once a democratic political order is established, Bobbio excludes—taxatively—its transformation by any similar scenario. The past of liberal democracy is viewed with a cool historicism; its present with a categorical absolutism. The influence of Croce—famous for the *sang-froid* of his history of liberty, served even by crimes against it—informs the first attitude; a resort to natural rights theory, abhorred by Croce, underlies the second. In tacitly playing on both registers, German-Italian idealism and Anglo-French empiricism, Bobbio is undoubtedly inconsistent. But he is not in breach of a common liberalism, which

[74] *Quale Socialismo?*, p. 74; WS, p. 91.

[75] *Politica e Cultura*, p. 55; *Liberalismo e Democrazia*, Milan 1985, p. 35. The latter text contains Bobbio's most extended discussion of the historical variants and vicissitudes of 19th century liberalism, including a shrewd assessment of Mill.

[76] *Liberalismo e Democrazia*, p. 36; 'Democrazia a maggioranza', *Revue Européenne des Sciences Sociales*, XIX, 1981, Nos. 54–55, p. 378.

[77] *Politica e Cultura*, p. 55.

[78] 'La regola di maggioranza e i suoi limiti', in V. Dini (ed), *Soggetti e Potere*, Naples 1983, p. 20.

virtually requires some amalgam of this kind.[79] The difficulty for him arises at the next step. For all the countries where liberal democracy prevails are capitalist. How, within this framework, is socialism then to be reached? Bobbio's honesty and lucidity do not permit him to evade or obscure the problem. He gives no clear-cut answer to it—the hesitations of his thought are very evident here. But at the end of the day, the conclusion towards which he inclines is unmistakeable. For he does look at the only two coherent strategies for a meaningful socialism available to him. These he describes as structural reforms from above, and widening of democratic participation from below. What is his verdict on them? He expresses a lethal scepticism about both. Writing of structural reforms, he asks: 'Let us assume that a total transformation can result from a series of partial reforms: up to what point is the system prepared to accept them? Who can exclude the possibility that the tolerance of the system has a limit, beyond which it will shatter rather than bend? If those whose interests are threatened react with violence, what is there to do except respond with violence?'[80] In other words, the central mechanisms of capitalist accumulation and reproduction may be inherently resistant to constitutional change, imposing a basic choice that forces the very notion of structural reform apart: either respect the structures, or transgress the reforms. Bobbio has himself never shown much interest in the strategy of structural reforms, whose history stretches back to Belgian and French debates in the 30's. But he has often dwelt on the prospect of a progressive democratization of civil society, as we have seen. He might be expected, therefore, to be more sanguine about the potential of this strategy. But in fact his conclusion is equally bleak. 'There are good reasons to suspect that a progressive extension of the democratic basis of our society will encounter an insuperable barrier—I say insuperable within the system—at the factory-gates.'[81] The space for radical reform is closed by the very properties of the economic order that call out for it. Such doubts, concurrent in their logic, effectively tend to cut the ground

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[79] Bobbio's philosophy of law reveals the same tension. On the one hand, he has been a more resolute exponent of legal positivism than Kelsen himself, pointing out the historically contingent character of the latter's 'fundamental norm'—one that can only be viewed as an expression of 'liberal ideology'. On the other hand, he shares the values of the *Rechtstaat* as they were essentially conceived by Kelsen, and so is driven towards a natural-rights position of the kind that was the object of the original positivist critique—if one now transposed onto what Bobbio terms a 'metajuridical plane'. For a delicate disentangling of the ensuing contradictions, see Sergio Cotta, 'Bobbio: un Positivista Inquieto', in Uberto Scarpelli (ed), *La Teoria Generale del Diritto—Problemi e Tendenze Attuale*, Milan 1983, pp. 41–55. The same conflict between an intellectual rejection and a political commitment to natural law foundations can be seen in Bobbio's treatment of human rights. These, he vigorously insists, form an ill-defined, shifting, often mutually incompatible congeries of claims—none of which can be deemed 'basic', since what seems fundamental is always particular to a given epoch or civilization. On the other hand, now that all governments acknowledge their codification in the UN Charter, the problems of their theoretical foundation have been resolved by the advent of their 'factual universality'—there is therefore no need to justify them philosophically, only to protect them politically. For this cutting of the Gordian knot, see 'Sul fondamento dei diritti dell'uomo' and 'Presente e avvenire dei diritti del'uomo', in *Il Problema della Guerra e le Vie della Pace* (first edition), Bologna 1970, pp. 119–157.

[80] *Quale Socialismo?*, p. 85; WS, pp. 100–101.

[81] *Quale Socialismo?*, p. 85; WS, p. 101. Indeed recently the scope of Bobbio's scepticism has broadened from factory to civil society as a whole. 'The extension of democratic instances to civil society now seems to me more an illusion than a solution': 'Introduzione', *Il Sistema Politico Italiano tra Crisi e Innovazione*, p. 20. Compare this dictum with the claim cited at note 68 above.

from the parliamentary-democratic road to socialism to which Bobbio is formally committed.

Moreover, they are doubled by even more radical doubts as to what might be the fate of democracy under socialism, once a classless society were achieved. It has been seen that Bobbio's liberalism is not of the economic kind: he has never shown special attachment to the market. But for the same reason he has not shown much interest in economic alternatives to the market either. Capitalism as a system of production, as distinct from a set of injustices in distribution, is in some ways little more than a mildly reprehensible referential background for Bobbio—on the whole rejected, but never analysed. Consequently, when he thinks of socialism, its change in the ownership of the means of production conveys no positive value in itself for him. On the contrary socialization, beyond the limits of the mixed economy, tends only to conjure up the spectre of an all-powerful State, now master of economic as well as political life—an old liberal fear, of course. The result is that Bobbio ends up by predicting that not only will the same obstacles to democracy exist under socialism as under capitalism, but that the dangers to it will actually be greater: 'I am convinced that in a socialist society democracy will be even more difficult.'[82] A paradoxical conclusion for a democratic socialist, to say the least.

But these two reflexions—the probable unviability of a democratic road to socialism, the greater risks to democracy from socialism—throw into involuntary relief Bobbio's ultimate historical choice. Between liberalism and socialism, he in practice opts for the former. At times he justifies his preference with the claim that it is in reality the more radical. In a certain sense, he writes, democracy is 'a much more subversive idea than socialism itself'.[83] That claim is today by no means confined to Bobbio. His way of redeeming it, too, is widespread—to redefine socialism as a sectoral specification of democracy, or local instantiation of a higher-order concept. Thus he declares his leaning to a conception of socialism which 'emphasizes control of economic power by an extension of the rules of the democratic game to the factory, or the firm in general, rather than the transition from one mode of production to another' that would involve an 'overall collectivization of the means of production'.[84] The significance of this move—one that has become virtually a *topos* of recent discussions—is in the substitution it makes. The reconceptualization of socialism as essentially economic democracy answers to a dual purpose. It serves at once to appropriate the central legitimation of the existing political order for the cause of social change, and to avoid the central ideological obstacle to the implementation of such change: namely, the institution of private property. Its logic is that of a circumvention—the word it would not speak is expropriation. As such, it has a long tradition behind it. In fact it was Mill himself who was probably the first explicit theorist of such a conception—envisaging socialism as the gradual growth of an industrial democracy that could afford to leave capitalist ownership of the means of production

[82] *Quale Socialismo?*, p. 83; WS, p. 99.
[83] *Quale Socialismo?*, p. 53; WS, p. 74.
[84] 'La filosofia politica'—Intervista, *Mondoperaio*, January 1986, p. 115.

formally intact, if it elevated workers to managerial powers over them 'without violence or spoliation'.[85] The same intellectual move, made for the same motives, can be found in Russell, for whom 'self-government in industry' was 'the road by which Britain can best approach Communism'.[86] Dewey had his own version of it, seeking to overcome 'autocratic methods of management' in enterprises that were 'harmful to democracy' because they militated against 'effective give-and-take communication' or 'free conversation'.[87] The reappearance of this substitution in Bobbio testifies to its persistence as a *leitmotif* of successive attempts to wed liberalism and socialism. If its practical fruit to date has been relatively small, the reason is in part that major social institutions do not generally allow themselves to be painlessly bypassed. The prerogatives of private property form an immensely strong bastion of the ruling ideology under capitalism, whose positive power is further fortified by the negative message inculcated by the division of labour—that organizational hierarchy is the condition of industrial efficiency. Together, these two have hitherto been more than a match for appeals to economic democracy they all too readily render *ultra vires*. Is it fortuitous that, contrary to the extensions of the suffrage on which they were optimistically modelled, the rights of co-determination in industry have so rarely, if ever, proved cumulative—have been so easily diluted or reversed?

The Permanence of Capitalism

Bobbio is too realistic to be unaware of these difficulties. His invocation of democracy as more subversive than socialism is more tactical than systematic. His real thought can be found elsewhere. Its actual conviction is the very opposite. 'The acceptance of a democratic regime

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[85] Mill's hope was that cooperative societies would prove so successful that workers would prove increasingly unwilling to work only for wages any longer. In these circumstances 'both private capitalists and associations will gradually find it necessary to make the entire body of labourers participants in profits'. Through this process, he thought, there could eventually occur 'a change in society' which 'without violence or spoliation, or even any sudden disturbance of existing habits and expectations, would realize, at least in the industrial department, the best aspirations of the democratic spirit'—ultimately prompting capitalists to lend their capital to workers 'at a diminishing rate of interest, and at last perhaps, even to exchange their capital for terminable annuities'. Mill developed these notions in the 1852 and 1865 editions of his *Principles of Political Economy*: see *Collected Works*, Vol. III, Toronto 1965, p. 793. Of modern writers, Dahl is perhaps closest in inspiration to Mill here. See his arguments for cooperative ownership and his conception of experimental advances towards it in *A Preface to Economic Democracy*, pp. 148–160.

[86] 'Capitalists value two things, their power and their money; many individuals among them value only the money. It is wiser to concentrate first on the power, as is done by seeking self-government in industry, without confiscation of capitalist incomes. By this means the capitalists are gradually turned into obvious drones, their active functions in industry become nil, and they can ultimately be dispossessed without dislocation and without the possibility of any successful struggle on their parts': *The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism*, London 1920, p. 183. It should be said that elsewhere Russell gave little reason for thinking that capitalists would set such small store by their power, as distinct from their income—the theme of *Power: a Social Analysis* was to be quite the reverse; or for assuming that an outcome obvious to their prospective dispossessors would not be so to them as well.

[87] *German Philosophy and Politics*, New York 1942 (re-edition), p. 46. Here as elsewhere Dewey anticipated leading themes in the writing of Habermas. Arguing that America needed a philosophy that would 'articulate the methods and aims of the democratic way of life', he asserted that 'the philosophy which formulates that method will be one which acknowledges the primacy of communication'—given that 'prejudices of economic status, of race, of religion imperil democracy because they set up barriers to communication, or deflect and distort its operation': pp. 46–47.

presupposes the acceptance of a moderate ideology', he declares.[88] For 'majority decisions in a political order based on universal suffrage permit changes *in* the system, but they do not allow a change *of* the system.'[89] The permanence of capitalism as a social order becomes, in other words, a premise of any effective participation within the representative state. Paradoxically, as Bobbio himself candidly notes, this does not mean that if capitalism is untouchable, democracy is thereby inviolable. History has shown otherwise—'one cannot change in a qualitative leap by democracy, but one can die by democracy.'[90] If a parliamentary road to socialism has yet to be seen, Italian and German experience between the wars is a reminder that there is a parliamentary road to fascism. This uncomfortable reality has to be faced. For Bobbio it does not qualify the value of liberal democracy, but enhances the need for constitutional safeguards to protect it.

These remain, in the end, his most abiding concern. Of the two problems—'who rules? and how do they rule?'—Bobbio declared without ado in 1975—'there can be no doubt that the second has always been more important than the first'.[91] *Always*: in other words, what matters is not which class dominates, but the way it dominates. Here Bobbio's option, at the deepest level, for the liberal pole of his thought becomes manifest. For the same reason, of the two critiques of representative democracy in his writings, it is the conservative and not the socialist that has final weight. In his most recent writings, that critique even tends—in a familiar figure—to become a perverse apology. Thus, making of necessity a virtue, Bobbio can write: 'Political apathy is in no way a symptom of crisis in a democratic system, but usually a sign of good health.'[92] It signifies a 'benevolent indifference' to politics as such, that is founded on good sense. For in democratic societies major social change is generally not the result of political action at all, but of the progress of technological capacities and the evolution of cultural attitudes—involuntary molecular processes, rather than deliberate legislative intervention. Such 'continuous transformation' through the stream of inventions and the adjustment of *mores* greatly reduces the significance of even 'traditional reformism', whose importance social-democracy—for all its moderation—has typically overestimated.[93] In these conditions, it is better to accept the political agenda of limited competition among elites rather than risk the stability of the constitutional framework by putting too ambitious demands on it. Bobbio expresses this with his habitual vivacity in the phrase: 'Nothing risks killing democracy so much as an excess of it.'[94] A fine elitist formula.

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[88] 'La filosofia politica', p. 114.
[89] 'La regola della maggioranza e i suoi limiti', p. 20.
[90] Ibid., p. 21.
[91] *Quale Socialismo?*, p. 38; WS, p. 61.
[92] *Il Futuro della Democrazia*, p. 61; FD, p. 67.
[93] 'Riformismo, socialismo, eguaglianza', *Mondoperaio*, May 1985, pp. 67–68.
[94] *Il Futuro della Democrazia*, p. 13; FD, p. 31. The thought is as old as the Roman oligarchy. Cf Cicero—'Too much freedom will itself reduce a free people to servitude': *Republic*, I, 68.

IV. Conclusions, Questions

How are such concluding cadences to be judged? Their meaning may be sought at two levels. At one of these, they without question reflect a certain biographical experience that has shaped Bobbio profoundly, and of which he is completely self-aware—that is, a specifically Italian disappointment. In no country of Western Europe, one might say, were political hopes on the left legitimately higher as the war came to an end than in Italy—which had produced the largest popular Resistance, the most vital intellectual ferment, the broadest radical labour movement; a moment whose memory is perhaps still not wholly extinct even today, something of it living on in the international aura of the PCI. But in none, too, were such hopes so radically confounded over the subsequent decades. Bobbio's texts form a crystalline prism of this history. In 1945, he declared that 'the expedient of universal suffrage closes the democratic experiment in the form of indirect democracy', and in the name of the federal ideals of Cattaneo ardently advocated an advance towards 'direct democracy' through a 'multiplication of the institutions of self-government'.[95] Twenty-five years later, republishing this essay together with others, he introduced it with the words: 'I do not hide from myself that the balance-sheet of our generation has been disastrous. We pursued the "Alcinesque seductions" of Justice and Liberty; we have achieved very little justice and are perhaps losing liberty.'[96] These lines were written in the bitter year—for Bobbio—of 1970. His fears that the freedom won by the Liberation would prove 'futile', squandered by the established order and then destroyed by terrorist subversion against it, reached their peak in the following period. By the mid eighties, he judged the worst dangers over and could observe with relief the relative stabilization of Italian democracy. The terms in which he did so, however, were scarcely a tribute to the civic spirit of the nation: 'One can be free by conviction or by mere habituation. I do not know how many Italians are really true lovers of liberty. Perhaps there are few. But there are many who, having breathed freedom for many years, could not do without it, even if they do not know it. To use a famous saying of Rousseau, in another context, Italians live in a society in which—for reasons of which most of them are ignorant and indifferent—they are "obliged to be free" by forces larger than themselves.'[97]

But this conclusion, withdrawing Bobbio's more apocalyptic predictions of the preceding decade, has not substantially softened his historical balance-sheet of the Republic he fought to create. Vindicating the values of the Resistance, a battle in which 'we were not mistaken', he has recently recalled once again the gap between the 'ideals of yesterday' and the 'reality of today', writing: 'We have learnt to face democratic society without illusions. We have not become more satisfied. We have

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[95] 'Stati Uniti d'Italia', republished in *Una Filosofia Militante. Studi su Carlo Cattaneo*, Turin 1971, p. 55. In 1946, Bobbio recounts, when the *Partito d'Azione* was in the throes of its internal crisis, 'I thundered against the idea of giving birth to a middle-class party that would merely restore the old parliamentary democracy that had been killed by fascism'. See his recent contribution to the special number of *Il Ponte* on Liberalsocialism: XLII, No 1, January–February 1986, p. 145 (a text which also contains some sharp comments on the destiny of the PSI).

[96] *Una Filosofia Militante*, p. xi.

[97] *Profilo Ideolgico del Novecento Italiano*, p. 183.

become less demanding. The difference between our concerns then and our preoccupations now is all in that. The whole quality of our common life has not improved, indeed in certain respects it has worsened. It is we who have changed, becoming more realistic and less ingenuous.'[98] This frank avowal explains a good deal of Bobbio's apparent adjustment to the discoloured minimalism of the representative order in Italy, his willingness to find reasons—or consolations—for the mortification of popular interest in politics, under elites whose regimen has for much of the time meant little more than bread and scandals. He has explained his own outlook on that scene with a characteristically self-critical straightforwardness. After developing the casuistics of conformity cited above—the benevolent character of political indifference, the necessary constraints on political alternatives—he remarked: 'I do not know whether the reflections I have been formulating here can be deemed generally reasonable and realistic. But I do know that they will be considered disillusioning and discouraging by those who, faced with the degradation of public life in Italy, the shameful spectacle of corruption, sheer ignorance, careerism and cynicism with which the majority of our professional politicians present us every day, think that the channels allowed by the system are inadequate to bring about reforms, let alone radically transform it.' Addressing these, Bobbio went on: 'The present writer belongs to a generation of people who lost their hopes more than thirty years ago, shortly after the end of the war, and have never recovered them except for occasional moments, as rare as they were fleeting, and which came to nothing. They came at the rate of one per decade: the revocation of the *Legge Truffa* (1953), the formation of the Centre-Left (1964), the great revival of the PCI (1975).' 'As someone who has been through many years of frustrated hopes, I have learnt to be resigned to my own impotence . . . But I fully accept that these arguments carry no weight with the young in Italy, who have not known Fascism and know only this democracy of ours, which is less than mediocre, and so are not equally disposed to accept the argument of the lesser evil.'[99]

Such sentiments, and the experience behind them, divide Bobbio from his great predecessors. There is no reason to doubt their sincerity. But in one respect they fail to do him justice. There is a difference between ideal and influence. Disappointment is not necessarily impotence. Bobbio's early hopes were not realized, but it is notable how often his later admonitions were heeded. If one compares his record with that of Mill or Russell or Dewey, it is clear that he has never been an original thinker in the same way. He is the first to underline the derivative character of his own principal ideas, for him a common trait of post-war Italian culture as distinct from that of the first years of the century.[100] But his political impact in his own time has certainly been greater than theirs. Bobbio in effect urged Eurocommunism on the PCI, and foresaw its adoption, twenty years before the event. He played a significant role in the abandonment by the PSI of its Marxist past. He helped to

[98] *Italia Civile*, p. 6.

[99] *Il Futuro della Democrazia*, pp. 64–65; FD, pp. 70–71.

[100] 'Everything that was done then betrays haste, improvisation and has no originality. We were, at best, popularizers.' *Maestri e Compagni*, p. 26.

discountenance the challenge of the Far Left in the same period. He anticipated the repudiation of the notion of a Third Road by both major parties of the Italian labour movement. It is difficult to think of another intellectual who has had such a real and visible effect on the political climate of their country since the war.[101] In successive debates Bobbio has earned his influence not only by an unusual combination of gifts of expression and of erudition, but by a singular personal transparency and probity. Even when defending increasingly neo-moderate positions against more than justified criticisms from radical opponents, his moral and intellectual superiority over them has generally shone through.

Yet that moderatism has ended, as we have seen, by casting the whole project of marrying liberalism and socialism into doubt. Mill described socialist schemes as 'chimerical', before the change of mind that started the history of theoretical attempts to unite them with liberal principles. Bobbio, after participating in the practical movement of the *Partito d'Azione* to achieve such a liberal socialism, has since pronounced *it* 'chimerical'—'no more than a lofty velleity'.[102] Beyond the historical reasons for this irony, inscribed in Bobbio's own political experience, there was an intellectual one too. From the outset, his theoretical formation included not only a socialist and a liberal but also a conservative strand. Bobbin has always remained sincerely, admirably progressive in his personal sympathies and intentions: by any standards an enlightenment thinker of nobility. But what his writings seem to show is a pattern of elective affinities at work, in spite of these intentions. For in Bobbio's texts, liberal socialism reveals itself to be an unstable compound: the two elements of liberalism and socialism, after seeming to attract one another, end by separating out, and in the same chemical process the liberalism moves towards conservatism.

How representative is that recombination? Beyond all Italian circumstances, how far are these elective affinities operative more widely—independently of the volition of individual thinkers—in modern political thought? As a term, liberalism first appeared in the world as a pennant of the 18th Brumaire of the Year VIII, when Napoleon brought the French Revolution to an end, declaring that he took power to 'protect men of liberal ideas'.[103] Through all its subsequent vicissitudes, that originating motive has perhaps never quite disappeared. But it also is true that the First Empire generated elsewhere a more radical reception of the idea—the same term inspiring in Spain the first European revolution against the Restoration. When the Old Order was challenged on a continental scale in 1848, the recurrent attempt to extend liberalism beyond itself to meet new social classes and values began. To date, what is striking is the disproportion between the intellectual credentials

[101] The one main exception to this record does him only honour—his opposition to nuclear weapons. See his bitter comments on the complete indifference of official Italian politics and culture to the issue in the second edition of *Il Problema della Guerra e le Vie della Pace*, Milan 1984, pp. 5–7: 'those who sound the alarm are like dogs howling at the moon'.

[102] *Una Filosofia Militante*, p. 201; *Liberalismo e Democrazia*, p. 62: 'Whereas the conjugation of liberalism and socialism has so far remained a lofty velleity, the growing identification of liberalism with market forces is an incontestable reality.'

[103] Otto Brunner, Werner Conze, Reinhart Koselleck, eds., *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, vol. III, Stuttgart 1982, pp. 749–751.

and the political results of the successive projects that followed. For all the good will and talent expended on it, the synthesis of liberalism and socialism has so far failed to take. That is not to argue that it must. The renewed energies the conception now attracts—since who could wish for an illiberal socialism?—might point in the other direction. It is too soon to say. But a sense of the history of the undertaking is likely to be a condition of resuming it to good effect.