

## *A Reply to Norberto Bobbio*

Dear Norberto Bobbio,

Let me say how much I appreciate your generous reply to my reflections on your book, *Destra e Sinistra*. I did not initially conceive this text for publication and later considered doing so only if you thought a response worthwhile. No reader of *De Senectute* would wish to cause you unnecessary distractions. So I am all the more touched by your reply. Since there is such substantial agreement between us on the main issues at stake, I can be quite brief in my response to your arguments. There are only five short points I should like to make.

(i) Your description of the contrast between my remarks on your work in 1988 and my recent comments is certainly acute. I had not realized this till you pointed it out, with some justifiable irony. Still, I would hold to the balance of both judgements, regarding the difference between them not so much as a contradiction in my view of your work, but rather as a sign of the productive tensions within your thought. I believe, as I suggested in the 1980s, that much of its intellectual richness—about which you are customarily modest—comes from the confluence within it of traditions of thought often of opposite origins, whose synthesis has not been static, but varied in response to successive historical situations. It seems to me that *L'Utopia Capovolta* of 1989 very lucidly marked the dividing-line between one such situation and another, as communism passed away and capitalism was left without 'barbarians at the gates', and that the emphasis of your writing has altered correspondingly. I take that as a token of vitality, not incoherence.

(ii) My reservation about the position of *Destra e Sinistra* in this latter phase essentially concerns what it does not, rather than what it does, say. Equality is—as you rightly insist—the core value of any meaningful Left. To uphold the ideal of equality is thus certainly an unrenouncable task of any progressive politics. But a *purely* axiological defence of equality is insufficient for a valid politics of the Left. To be operative, the ideal must be grounded in real material processes and social projects. Here was the absence I felt in *Destra e Sinistra*. I do not

say that it is easy to make good. Neither the collective subjects nor the institutional designs needed to convert a normative aspiration into a historical enterprise are very obviously to hand. But without them, the distance between Left and Right risks becoming a merely verbal *clause de style*—a rhetorical more than a practical distinction.

(iii) The difficulty here can be illustrated by the examples you give of the continuing pertinence of the idea of the Left. The Labour government in Britain plans to abolish the right of hereditary peers to sit in the House of Lords. 'Is this not', you ask, 'an egalitarian proposal?' Would that we could be so sure. For Labour is not proposing to make the Upper House a democratically elected chamber, but one that will consist wholly—rather than, as now, partially—of government appointees. Is this really a democratic advance? Paradoxically, the hereditary peers—congenitally hierarchical as they are—because they are independent of any specific government, have on occasion acted as a barrier to oppressive legislation by recent Conservative administrations, even defying Mrs Thatcher herself. Under the Blair government, the Lords have again shown their independence by refusing legislation designed to protect the empire of Rupert Murdoch, our local Mediaset, with whom the Prime Minister enjoys close relations. An Upper Chamber filled by official patronage rather than feudal rank would, alas, probably be more docile than the present one. We must hope that public reaction against this bureaucratic scheme will oblige Labour to change course, and create an elective assembly. But its current—manifestly instrumental—proposal does little to enhance the moral credit of the Left.

The second element in Labour's programme to which you refer, as evidence of egalitarian intention, are its promises of educational reform. But here too, the record so far is not encouraging, even pointing in the opposite direction. The principal act of the new government has been to impose compulsory loans for students—that is, obliging them to pay for their studies at university, out of future earnings. This is a measure that the Conservative Prime Minister John Major refused to introduce, despite pressure from his financial officials, on the grounds that it narrowed popular access to higher education. Now a Labour government has legislated what a Tory government dared not do. Can you imagine the centre-left coalition forcing through such a change in Italy?

(iv) I do not want to put too much weight on these examples, no doubt picked casually enough for the purposes of your argument. But there is a more general point here. You suggest that so long as the terms 'Left' and 'Right' are utilized with passion—even ferocity—on all sides, as in Italy today, we can be confident that the distinction between them continues to reflect a profound division. But we have only to reflect on historical experience to realize that this need not be so. There are many cases in history where ideological labels persist long after the substance to which they were once attached has disappeared—what we might call

the syndrome of the 'Holy Roman Empire'. Political antonyms form a special case, but here too we must always distinguish between oppositions of principle and oppositions of partisanship. Conflicts between 'parties', of great virulence, can be extraordinarily durable even in the absence of socially significant distinctions between them—the mechanisms of partisanship perpetuating rival loyalties over the longest periods. Violent clashes between Blues and Greens, mere chariot-factions, dominated the political life of Byzantium for centuries. Our parties on television inspire less passion than the teams of the hippodrome. Should we be proud, or troubled, at the difference?

(v) To point to these dangers is not to say they are already with us. You are right to resist a too easy cynicism that would deny any reality at all to the traditions of Right and Left in Europe today. But if we are to give renewed life to the idea of the Left today, we must not forsake *la proie pour l'ombre*. A real revival of egalitarian politics requires measures to create employment, reduce income differentials, abolish fiscal privileges, redirect financial flows—that is, an ability to challenge what is 'economically correct' according to the mandatory doctrines of the hour. With a modicum of luck, a rare opportunity could shortly arise in Europe. Should the SPD win the federal elections in September, the four major countries of Western Europe—France, Britain, Germany, Italy—will for the first time in history be ruled simultaneously by governments declaredly of the Left. This constellation would occur just as the great project of a single continental currency comes into being. The power to reshape the conditions of life for the peoples of Europe for the better would lie in the hands of the official Left, across national frontiers, in a way that it has never done before. Let us hope that, if this chance is given, the European Left as a whole proves capable of acting as the party of movement rather than the party of order once again—guided by that 'pole-star of equality' which you have set before us better than any other.

Berlin, April 1998