

At the Beginning of History

Dear Perry Anderson,

I am grateful for the attention with which you have read my little book, *Destra e Sinistra*, and the care with which you have commented upon it. I cannot conceal the fact that this has pleased me, despite the fact that your overall judgement is more negative than positive. In Italy the unforeseen and to me incomprehensible success of the book in terms of sales was not matched by an equally serious interest on the part of its reviewers. It was seen as a mere polemical pamphlet, as for that matter it was seen by most readers, although not by its author. I apologize that this reply has been so much delayed. In a recent book of mine, in which I have put together some reflections on old age, I pointed out that the clearest sign of ageing is the progressive slowing down of the movements of body and mind.¹ An old man has less time stretching out before him, and what little he has, he wastes. I have picked up the fifteen pages of your text, and I have shuffled them between my fingers I do not know how

many times. I have read them again and again, until I practically know them by heart. At one reading, I would underline one phrase, at another time, another, so now the text is so full of marks that no page remains unscathed.

I have also been slow and late in answering because, of the fifteen or so objections which you put to me, some appeared unclear to me, not least because they referred to books with which I am unfamiliar, so that I feared I might misunderstand certain aspects of what you were saying; others appeared to me so well-grounded as to leave me in the position of not knowing what to answer, other than to say that I had made a factual or logical error. I am the first to acknowledge the defects of a work which, though it was not improvised, was insufficiently argued through. I now look at it with detachment. I have asked myself, after each re-reading of your review, facing up to the difficulties of varied nature which an answer would have required, if it was really worth it. I changed my mind on this every other day. I have never been very sure of myself. Now, less than ever.

I was lingering among my doubts and weighing the pros and cons of an answer. Then came the Italian translation of your article in an issue of the Italian review *Reset*, under the title, encouraging and embarrassing at the same time, 'Destra e sinistra. Il caso non è chiuso' ['Left and Right. The Case Remains Open']. *Reset's* editor, Giancarlo Bosetti, who took the initiative of translating and publishing the article, appeared to be taking up the challenge of the all too famous author, Francis Fukuyama, who has announced, together with the end of history, the end of the Left. Confronted with this—audacious and senseless—prophecy, I had to accept that the case remains open.

Between Socialism and Realism

It was not the first time that you have dealt with my writing with insight—*New Left Review* published your essay, 'The Affinities of Norberto Bobbio'.² This text was followed by an exchange between us which was published in the Italian journal *Teoria Politica*.³ But I have the impression that in this new encounter we have exchanged roles. Before, you reproached me with what you saw as a contradiction between my political realism—attributed to the influence of such figures as Vilfredo Pareto and Gaetano Mosca—and my liberal-socialist ideals. Today, if I understand you correctly, your objection is the opposite: the main defect of my discussion of Left and Right appears to lie in the contradiction between the purely ideological, axiological, almost metaphysical definition which I give of the Left,

¹ Norberto Bobbio, *De Senectute*, Turin 1996.

² Perry Anderson, 'The Affinities of Norberto Bobbio', *NLR* 170, July–August 1988, collected in *A Zone of Engagement*, Verso, London 1992, pp. 87–129.

³ 'Un Carteggio tra Norberto Bobbio e Perry Anderson', *Teoria politica*, vol. 5, nos. 2–3, 1988–89, pp. 293–308.

and the lack of realism which would prevent me from realizing how matters are proceeding in a world in which Left and Right are becoming less and less distinguishable. In the first instance I am an inconsequential realist, in the second an ill-equipped idealist. In one case, I am so much a realist that I cut the ground from under my own wishful idealism. In the other case, I am so idealistic as not to notice the straightforward facts which contradict me.

I confess that I find it difficult to understand how one can still defend the distinction between Left and Right in a historical period in which, apparently, Left and Right converge into each other in their concrete political actions—and, even more, how one can accept your final appeal to struggle to prevent the defeat of the Left, of the ‘true’ Left—without appealing to ideal values and, speaking frankly and without false modesty, without appealing to damned ideologies.

The ideal value on the basis of which I have distinguished Left from Right—and which, at the end of your review, you characterize as ‘purely axiological’—is that of equality. What has distinguished the Left in all its historical forms over the last two centuries, both ‘functionally positive’ and the ‘functionally negative’, is what I am inclined to define as the ‘ethos’ (which is also ‘pathos’) of equality. This is not an invention of mine. In my book I simply rehearsed and summarized an opinion common to the literature of both sides. In analyzing and annotating a variety of writings on this topic, especially by contemporary Italian authors, I was taking stock of a consolidated tradition of thought. In continuing to follow debates on the Left and the Right, I have found no reason to change my views. I would like to quote something Michael Walzer said at the end of an interview published by *Reset*. Noting that ‘there is a constant tendency of society to produce hierarchies and inequalities’, which presents a ‘challenge for the Left’, Walzer went on: ‘the Left is created for this; its function is to oppose and periodically correct the new forms of inequality and authoritarianism which are continuously produced by society’.⁴

The ethos of equality inspired the Russian Revolution as much as European social democracy. The history of socialism is to a large extent the history of egalitarian ideals, pursued either through the complete abolition of private property—which was considered by Rousseau to be the main cause of the *l'inégalité parmi les hommes*—or through a variety of policies designed to promote social justice by different forms of income redistribution. Even Tony Blair’s electoral manifesto—which you probably deplore—states: ‘The challenge is to rethink equality . . . at a time when social inequalities appear to be increasing’.⁵ In other words, the first anxiety of a party which continues to consider itself of the Left—even if, you imply along with many

⁴ M. Walzer, ‘Il doppio dissenso di *Dissent*’, interview with Clementina Casula, *Reset*, no. 43, December 1997, p. 36.

⁵ Tony Blair, *Il nuovo Labour* (assembled by Marina Calloni), Rome 1997, pp. 12–13.

critics on the Left and sympathizers on the Right,⁶ it in practice carries out policies of the Right—is at the rise in inequality.

Blair and Fukuyama

It may well be a very modest reform, but is not the proposal to transform or to abolish the House of Lords an egalitarian move? Why does this proposal come from a party which continues to define itself and its programme as on the Left? Is not the abolition of privilege inspired by that egalitarian passion which has distinguished the Left throughout its history? In the same manifesto I read that a Labour government should promote a more 'egalitarian' educational and university system.⁷ Is this not another traditional concern of the Left?

You are perfectly right to object that there is no relationship between communist egalitarianism and social-democratic egalitarianism. But, as you know, I have tried to explain that the word 'equality' means nothing if we do not define 'between whom, in relation to what and according to which criterion' we are speaking of it.⁸ There can be countless different forms of egalitarian distribution even if they produce quite diverse results.

This ethos of equality, as a characteristic of the Left, finds confirmation if we look at its opposite, that ultimate defence of the ethos—if we can call it that—of inequality, purveyed by one of the most reactionary writers of recent times, namely Francis Fukuyama, for whom the end of history coincides with the triumph of American capitalism in the years of Reagan and Bush.⁹ This is an author whose work you have extensively discussed and severely criticized, in a long essay to which it would be difficult to add.¹⁰ In a recent interview with Giancarlo Bosetti, this prophet of the end of history expressed the conviction that the collapse of communism must be interpreted as the definitive proof of the catastrophic mistake committed by the movements of the Left—principally the communist movement, but also social democracy, albeit in a milder form: the error of believing that equality was both a desirable objective and an infallible proof of historical progress. On the contrary, argues Fukuyama, the principal motor of historical progress is inequality, not only because it is functional for the capitalist market, but also because it is in itself 'right'.¹¹

This is a thesis designed to undermine not merely all means hitherto employed in the pursuit of equality, but the end itself. Fukuyama

⁶ So much so that it has attracted the admiration of the Chairman of FIAT, Cesare Romiti. See 'Romiti: in politica scelgo Blair' ('I Choose Blair'), *Corriere della Sera*, 30 January 1998, p. 7.

⁷ Blair, *Il nuovo Labour*, p. 13.

⁸ Bobbio, *Destra e sinistra*, p. 100.

⁹ See the critique of Fukuyama's theories in Marco Da Ponte, ed., *Dentro le Nazioni Unite*, Rome 1996, p. 82.

¹⁰ Perry Anderson, 'The Ends of History', in *A Zone of Engagement*, pp. 279–375.

¹¹ The interview with Fukuyama appeared in *L'Unità*, 4 December 1997, p. 4.

develops his argument in two registers, a philosophy of history and an ontology: (i) history does not progress through an equalization of inequalities, but through individual or collective struggles for supremacy; (ii) human beings, realistically rather than idealistically understood, aspire not to equality but to superiority over their fellows, through competition and victory over opponents.

I shall not pursue Fukuyama's ideas here—not least because your essay 'The Ends of History' examines them much more thoroughly than I could. I would only like to add that Fukuyama radically distorts the interpretation of Hegel's 'Master-Slave' dialectic which he borrows from Kojève's famous commentary. For Kojève, the conflict between Master and Slave does not end, as Fukuyama suggests, with the victory of the Master but that of the Slave, through the activity of work:

The Master can never detach himself from the World in which he lives, and if this World perishes, he perishes with it. Only the Slave can transcend the given World (which is subjugated to the Master) and not perish . . . in transforming the World by his work, the Slave transforms himself too, and thus creates the new objective conditions, that permit him to take up the liberating Fight for recognition that he refused in the beginning for fear of death.¹²

In fact, of course, the idea that the supremacy of the Master lies in his willingness to confront the risks of death is contradicted by the daily evidence of wars today. Those who face the supreme danger of death are not Masters but Slaves—those who, in obedience to their Masters, make of themselves and their bodies living projectiles, instruments of death.

In the course of contesting Fukuyama's arguments, so egregiously rightist in cast, you have yourself written some pages about the Left and its ideals which I take as the happiest confirmation of that merely 'axiological' stance which—while you criticize it in me—you express and illustrate much more effectively than I. Noting that the culture of the Left has been far from demolished by the collapse of Soviet communism or the difficulties of Western social democracy, you remark that the vitality of the socialist tradition continues to be displayed on many sides. Excessive faith in market forces offers 'no solution' to the difficulties of capitalism: 'the global consequences of their spontaneous development are the visible refutation of Austrian conceptions of it as a beneficent catallaxy'.¹³ You end by raising the possibility that the acute international tensions of our present world could create the preconditions for a new programme of 'social recon-

¹² A. Kojève, *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel. Leçons sur la Phénoménologie de l'Esprit professées de 1933 à l'École des Hautes Études réunies par Raymond Queneau*, Paris 1947, p. 34; *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, trans. James H. Nichols, Jr., New York 1969, pp. 29–30.

¹³ Anderson, 'The Ends of History', p. 363.

struction', in which 'socialism would not so much be succeeded by another movement, as redeemed in its own right as a programme for a more equal and liveable world'.¹⁴

The Perils of Reformism

In taking so seriously the work of authors who argue against my views, I sense that you wanted to test me—by riding the tiger, so to speak. You make it quite clear that you do not share their faith in salvation through the market, which is the main front of conflict and dividing-line between Left and Right. We may refer here to Albert Hirschman's excellent little book, *The Rhetoric of Reaction*.¹⁵ Reformers, so the refrain goes, are always wrong—especially when they think they can intervene in the natural (that is to say, spontaneous) course of things, to alter or correct them. They imagine they are acting for the good of society but achieve the very opposite; they think they have introduced useful changes when in fact things remain just as they were before; they even threaten gains already achieved. Blinkered by their prejudices, they have not learnt how the world turns; that not every evil is for the worst; that 'plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose'; that 'you can't have your cake and eat it'. Such are clichés we hear repeated *ad nauseam*.

I am not saying that arguments dictated by the passion for equality are beyond challenge. But so far at least, nobody has managed to prove to me that inequalities between people are solely natural and therefore unchangeable, or that class inequalities have ceased to matter because incomes have been redistributed. A Left that allows itself to be charmed by these sentiments is defeated before the fight begins. Were they irrefutable, it would indeed be dead and buried, or should lay down arms without even military honours.

In fact, your main argument against me is very different. I refer to the beginning of your text, when you appeal to my realism to look at the 'external context' of European politics. How could anyone fail to see that the governing parties of the Left, in Britain, France, and lately also in Italy—where the first steps to de-regulate small trading have been recently taken by a government of the Left—are carrying out the same policies as the Right?

I realize this perfectly well. It is a matter of daily public debate. One of our most widely read political writers of the Left, Marco Revelli, unambiguously entitled a recent book *Le Due Destre* (The Two Rights).¹⁶ He argues that one of them tries to pass itself off as the Left, but is in reality a technocratic Right, while the other—which

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 375.

¹⁵ Albert Hirschman, *The Rhetoric of Reaction: Perversity, Futility, Jeopardy*, Cambridge, MA 1991.

¹⁶ Marco Revelli, *Le Due Destre*, Turin 1996.

lays exclusive claim to the label—is simply a populist Right. Revelli is not saying that there is no room for a genuine Left in Italy, or that it is impossible to distinguish a Left from a Right. He simply wants to underline that the political and social alignments traditionally defined as 'Left' have suffered a momentous defeat.

Have they been defeated forever? Those who want a passionate but well-reasoned answer to this question may find it in an even newer book by Revelli, now in our best-seller lists, *La Sinistra Sociale. Oltre la civiltà del lavoro* (The Social Left. Beyond the Civilization of Work). There the historical defeat of socialism in all its forms is considered from a long-term perspective, and on a global scale. Yet Revelli still holds fast to the conviction that the Left—understood in its ideal meaning as a cause committed to the emancipation of men and women—lives on a regulating principle of historical development. Have the reasons for a Left really disappeared just because the Right has won and forced the Left to accept its terms, today and perhaps for a long historical period? Are not these very terms going to create new inequalities to challenge the Left on another plane? Could the Left ever gather the strength again for that, other than in the name of ideal principles? What could these principles be, if not those which you describe as the goals of a more equal and liveable world?

The Demonization of the Left

So I wonder if it is really true that the opposition of Left and Right has been exhausted in the reality which confronts us. I must innocently confess that in my everyday life, at least in a country like Italy, I have not noticed it. Were we to judge by the frequency of clashes between partisans of each side, I would almost be tempted to say that the tension between them has never been more visible or startling than today. To fall under suspicion of being on the Left, in these years of a revived Right, is regularly to be attacked and insulted as unpatriotic. The Left is increasingly depicted as the 'demonic face of power' (I refer to Gerhard Ritter's book, *Die Daemonie der Macht*, 1947), just as the Right was seen by the Left after the defeat of fascism. Every morning I listen to a radio programme in which journalists from a variety of newspapers take turns in reading and commenting on items in the press. Although they all attempt to speak in the most neutral manner, I can immediately tell—especially by their answers to questions from listeners—whether they are on the Left or the Right. Why should that be, if there is no longer any difference between them? It is not hard to see why. The reasons for an 'axiological' distinction between Left and Right, of the kind I argue, are not only those which might appear to be cancelled by the acceptance on the Left of the beneficial effects of the market. There are many other reasons as well.

One of the most dramatic problems which our countries face—and which has for the first time emerged in all its gravity over the past

few years in Italy—is the ongoing scale of immigration of people seeking work from Third World or Eastern European countries. Here the dividing-line between Left and Right is extremely clear. The Left is more inclusive, the Right is more exclusive; and the Left is more inclusive because more egalitarian, while the Right is more exclusive because less egalitarian. In Turin, a city with many immigrants, the election campaign of 1996 largely revolved around this issue. Fortunately the Left won here. The Right numbered among its supporters people who openly said the problem of immigrants could be solved by putting unwanted guests on a plane and deporting them to their country of origin. To give another small but suggestive example: a few months ago, the left-wing council of the city held a public ceremony for the twinning of Turin with the first city in Guatemala to have a mayor of Mayan origin, Quetzaltenango, in the presence and in honour of the Nobel Prize-winner Rigoberta Menchu. Why was it that none of the representatives of the Right on the council showed up?

The Market and the Archbishop of Milan

I am not looking for excuses. These are issues beyond the class conflicts that engendered the great division between Left and Right in the last century. I will pass over the fact that class conflicts themselves have not disappeared, but have rather tended to be transferred from the scene within the capitalist states to the relationship between the ruling classes of the rich countries and the proletariat of the poor countries. Actually, they have not even disappeared altogether even in the countries of the centre, despite the announcement by *Business Week* to workers that ‘we are all in the same boat’ now.¹⁷

There are many other reasons for conflict. There are conflicts between races, between ethnic groups, between majorities and religious and cultural minorities. These conflicts are increasing and will go on doing so, since they are the expression of convulsive shifts of people from one country to another in quest of employment. Such conflicts are to be counted amongst the major problems of the near future.

I am well aware that the decisive challenge for the survival and rebirth of the Left is posed by the victory of the market economy over that of the plan. However, to acknowledge this defeat, which you invite me to reflect upon at the end of your comment, is not to give up the fight. Have you not said that there are problems to which the market cannot offer a solution? Might one not add that there is *no* problem which can be left exclusively to market solutions? Here the Left should have as much, or even more, to say than ever. Do we really want to leave the task of denouncing the evils of capitalism, as it proclaims the end of history and a future without

¹⁷ *Business Week*, 23 May 1994; cited in Noam Chomsky, *The Prosperous Few and the Restless Many*, edited by David Barsamir, Berkeley 1993.

opposition, to the Pope and the Archbishop of Milan?¹⁸ Is it possible the Left has nothing to say about a globalization that has truly unleashed the 'animal spirits' of capitalism?¹⁹

If by the 'Left' we mean a historical cause committed to fight for a more equitable and liveable world, the way ahead is still very long—at least if we widen our horizons beyond the borders of our own countries, as we should in the age of globalization, sometimes exalted and sometimes decried. I would venture to say, I know provocatively, that so far as the future of the Left is concerned, humanity has by no means reached the 'end of history'. Perhaps it is only at the beginning.

Turin, February 1998

Translated by Guido Franzinetti

¹⁸ I refer to an interview of Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini with Igor Man, published in *Corriere della Sera*, 21 December 1997, p. 9. See the collection of opinions opposing the Cardinal's views, published by Pierluigi Battista in *La Stampa*, 23 December 1997.

¹⁹ G. Ruffolo, 'Europa senza soggetto, sinistra senza progetto', in the book *Sinistra di fine secolo*, Rome 1997, p. 138.