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Italy

'Politics' stalled but austerity continues... and kills

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On April 4, Romeo Dionis 62, and his wife Annamaria Sopranzi 68, left their apartment and went down to a small room next to their garage. There they hung themselves side by side. They left notes apologising for their actions and a note with their sister's mobile number. When Guissppe, 72, the brother of Annamaria found the bodies he went to the local port and threw himself off the wall into the sea.

Romeo was a bricklayer who was unemployed and also was finding it difficult to get paid for work he had done. Annamaria had a small pension of about 500 euros a month. They had debts and a mortgage to pay, a little time before he had gone to the local council seeking work. Due to recent austerity measures he was not able yet to take a pension. The police have no doubt that economic difficulties were the reasons for these terrible events. They lived in what is considered a more prosperous region of Italy – the Marches which has always been governed by the centre left. They were ashamed to go the social services which anyway would not have changed their material circumstances. Of course there has been a chorus of moral handwringing by all the leading politicians but nearly all have supported austerity policies that have led to this sort of situation.

You may think this is exceptional but as soon as friends talked about this they added that somebody did the same thing a few weeks ago here in Salerno. We know that the same thing is happening in Greece and there is an increase in the suicide rate in Britain too.

A close relative, we can call him Arturo, owns a small clothes shop with a partner, and he tells me that they have not paid themselves a salary for at least two years and have a significant debt. They tell me also that 60 shops have had to close since Xmas in a small town of 60,000. Nearly everyone I meet during this short stay has a story to tell about how the crisis is affecting them. Many friends or relatives' children in their late twenties and early thirties have never had a proper job with a permanent contract and have had to leave for the north or another country to find some sort of work. A son put in long hours working for a company connected to the local authority but is still trying to get paid – this is a common problem since my niece has experienced the same problem in Florence. Another young man thinks he is lucky because he can get some free work experience with an estate agent. All my teacher or public sector friends have seen their salaries frozen for years and their pensionable ages disappearing across the horizon. Pensioners like my father-in-law now pay more and more for their medicine. Only 17% of new labour contracts are permanent with reasonable conditions and just as in Britain more and more are obliged to become self-employed without rights or protection but are actually working for a company. I could go on and on.

Family structures

Remember this is in a country where there is hardly any housing benefit and no income support. Without the continued resilience of extended family structures and the charities – particularly the Catholic Church – there would be an even worst crisis of basic living conditions. Like the mushrooming of foodbanks in Britain we have 'poor people's canteens' which are overwhelmed with demand. Hundreds of thousands of young people are leaving Italy to search for work in London, Paris, Berlin or elsewhere. They will have to squat, share rooms or work in the informal economy. But anything is better than endless years reliant on their parents chasing the fewer and fewer unregistered jobs in bars or babysitting that they are overqualified for. Another looming problem if this crisis continues for years to come is that the grandparents/parents' 'safety net', which subsidise the younger generation, will be used up or disappear as they pass on – the pension dies with them.

On the television yesterday there was another of those interminable political discussion programmes where politicians, professors and journalists pontificate for considerably longer than on Newsnight. However, at least this one had a live link with a group of workers from the Merloni factory in Umbria which had been closed down. One of the workers, who had been on a special unemployment benefit (cassa integrazione) of 500 euros a month for 5 years, which was now ending, exploded in rage at all the empty talk in the studio about the constitution and the 57 ways the next government could be stitched together. He basically said that the politicians and the commentators had no idea of what was actually happening on the ground. It is precisely this anger and at times despair that explains what happened in the last elections with the extraordinary breakthrough of Beppe Grillo's 5 Star Movement (M5S).

All my friends and most of my relatives (apart from a small Berlusconi wing) have always voted moderate or more radical left. This time many had voted Grillo. Why? As several said not because they particularly approve of Grillo's occasional vulgarity or every denunciation but because they believe that the political system needs a huge shake up. Some pundits in Italy (or Britain) say that his mantra that the M5S is neither right nor left and it wants to clear out the whole political caste is a sign of incipient fascism, but they are mistaken and are not listening to ordinary people. For most people their direct experience at least for over 20 years is that the centre left and the centre right parties (and that includes the ex-communists now in the PD –Democratic Party) have mostly done the same thing. These parties have cut their wages, reduced their pensions, made them work longer, cut social spending, failed to create jobs and have obeyed the Troika. If you add to that the way the political caste (PD included) have paid themselves huge salaries and incredible privileges not just in parliament but in all the other levels of government then you can understand the anger. Worse of all these super-remunerated representatives have for decades failed to create public sector organisations that function efficiently at even the most basic level. Renewing a license or official document can take for ever and people regularly travel hundreds of miles to avoid having operations in their local hospital. The politicians have used the public institutions as a means of raising more funds through bribes or contracts with their own companies or placing their supporters at every level. People are also angry that their taxes then also publicly finance these corrupt parties.

M5S

Consequently the M5S focus a lot on policies that attack what they call the 'partocracy' head on. They say all politicians should by law only be able to have two terms of office, that nobody who is being charged or is guilty of crimes should be allowed to take office (in recent years 25 or more MPs were in this category), that public funding of political parties should end and that there should be a law on conflicts of interests. The latter obviously deals with Berlusconi or others that own huge areas of the media and can still be involved in a political system that regulates such matters. Many of M5S's other policies such as ecological opposition to mega projects like the high speed train link in the Val de Susa as well as the idea of a basic citizens income also attracted voters and were to the left of the PD coalition.

Where are we now forty days after the vote? People have joked here that even the Church has managed to elect a pope more quickly than the politicians have formed a government. Essentially the February elections produced three more or less equal minorities:

the PD who have a relative majority in the lower house and hence get a bonus guaranteeing that, the PDL/Lega (Berlusconi and the Northern League) whose votes in the Senate elections got a bonus due to the infamous Porcellum electoral mechanism that Berlusconi had introduced which blocks a PD majority in the Upper house and the

M5S who are a whisker behind the PD as the second party with 163 MPs in both houses.

You need a clear working majority in both houses to govern. Although Berlusconi did far better than expected his

party still lost millions of votes compared to the previous elections. The M5S has gone up in the three years since its foundation from scores of around 3% to 25% plus today and is the main factor for what everyone is called the 'stallo' or the stalled political situation today. The president, who operates more or less like the British Queen, in that he/she dissolves parliament and calls on party leaders to form a government, first gave Bersani, as the relative majority party leader, the chance to form a government.

Bersani for a week desperately tried to work a deal, primarily with the M5S. Moving smartly away from the PD's previous attacks on the movement as anti-political, crypto-fascist or rightwing populists he drew up an 8 point plan that basically included a number of Grillo's key policies on the political caste e.g. reducing politicians pay, cutting the number of MPs, limiting the number of mandates, changing the electoral system etc. Despite some wavering from a few of his MPs and petitions by over a hundred thousand of his voters on the web calling for a deal with the PD, Grillo resisted any conciliation. Most of my friends who had voted M5S criticised this position and said that a deal for a short term government to carry out some of the key demands would have been a step forward. However Grillo has reiterated that if people voted for his movement thinking he would do a deal with a part of this 'partocracy' then they were not listening to what he was saying. Consequently Napolitano had to recognise that Bersani did not have the numbers needed to govern and made his next move.

This week the president has established two commissions, one on the economy and one on the political system made up of ten 'wise' men or sages. Indeed they are all men and are mostly aligned with the main political groupings although excluding the M5S. The latter is far too maverick for the Troika or the Italian oligarchy. They have to come up with proposals within eight to ten days that the parties can discuss as a basis of a new government. In the meantime Monti's government continues on an operational basis particularly in terms of reassuring the European Troika. Napolitano had to deny that Draghi (European Bank boss) had telephoned him to entreat him to stay in post and to come up with a holding measure to reassure the markets. The president's spokesperson said that it was Napolitano that called Draghi – so no pressure there then! Faced with an explosion of anger in the press from women who felt that wisdom was not limited to men Napolitano apologised for this. Just yesterday one of the wise men, Valerio Onida, was tricked into talking to a radio show and admitted that the whole thing was just a delaying measure that probably would not produce much. He also added that they just needed a way to allow Berlusconi to enjoy his old age in peace and that would help them move forward. As usual these days Grillo came up with the best one liner – *i saggi sono le badanti della democrazia* =these sages are the terminal care nurses for democracy.

Berlusconi has repeatedly called for Bersani and the PD to form a government with the PDL – accepting Bersani as the prime minister. Bersani up to now has refused. On the one hand he thought a reform government might attract Grillo or enough M5S MPs to work and on the other hand a deal with Berlusconi would cause huge problems in the PD. Berlusconi of course is also keen to be in government since it makes it more difficult for the judges to finally nail him. He has gone along with the wise men manoeuvre without much enthusiasm and has said either there is a deal with the PD or Italy should return to the polls as early as June. Bersani (and Napolitano) have both said it would be bad for Italy (i.e. the markets would not like it) if the uncertain political situation continued with new elections.

Napolitano unlike Queen Elizabeth

A complicating factor in all this is that Napolitano, unlike Queen Elizabeth, has a limited term of office which ends in May so there has to be a new election for his post. This post has not always been so important but where you have a complex electoral outcome the president is more important. Hence it is now likely that the president will be elected before the government is formed. Berlusconi has sworn total war if the centre left get one of their people as president. Already contacts are underway between the PD and PDL on this question and there might be a subsequent movement on a government agreement. In the meantime Renzi, the leader of a current in the PD that got 40% in the primary elections for the leadership of the left coalition, has made his move. He has criticised the week

long negotiations Bersani led to form a government and has said there should be a deal with the PDL or new elections. Although careful not to call directly for a deal with the PDL at this time Renzi represents the ‘modernising’ neo-liberal right wing inside the PD and along with D’Alema, Veltroni and others he has always been more favourable to that. Renzi knows that if Bersani can do a deal it delays his possibility of taking over the leadership. Berlusconi and the PDL are happy for the Renzi people to cause havoc in the PD but are aware that in any new elections if Renzi were to be the new PD leader he could take more votes from them.

So where does all this byzantine political manoeuvring leave those Italians whose small businesses are going under, who are losing their jobs or any unemployment benefit?

In an earlier article before the elections we said that whatever happened Monti would win. The paradox is that although his slate did badly (just around 10% or less) and people largely voted against his austerity measures he is still the current prime minister. He might even feature in some new Bersani or grand coalition government. In another sense he also wins because his austerity policies are still firmly in place and the competing parties either endorse them (PD/PDL) or have weak or incoherent alternatives (M5S). Grillo’s people have many correct positions on the political caste and some of the reforms can be supported by the radical left but at the end of the day there is an illusion that if political representation can be cleansed and democratised with the help of the internet then the economic questions can be resolved. The centres of real power over the economy are not challenged in Grillo’s world. True, there is talk a soft exit from the euro, of the state helping small and medium businesses, of a citizen’s income but there is no plan to really deal with the deficit, with the troika or with the bosses who run the key pillars of the economy. The M5S does have many activists who are involved in social or ecological movements like the NO-TAV campaign or the successful anti-water privatisation referendum but it does not have any orientation to the workplace or to working people as a class with potential political leadership. It relates to citizens, or the people or to the idea that each person is equal on the internet. It is essentially an inter-class approach to politics.

Another serious weakness in the M5S movement is the lack of internal democracy or structures which allow activists to express different views to the leadership. In its rejection of all parties it has substituted a web based structure where individuals can express opinions but mostly it is used to relay the line or policies from Grillo or Casaleggio (the internet entrepreneur and other key leader). So the candidates were voted for and selected online. The political brand is owned by Grillo and where there is any dissidence it can be removed. The problem arises when the movement becomes as big as it is now and there are 160 MPs and likely to be many more at local or regional level. Probably Grillo never thought that at this election they would be big enough to be a player in government negotiations so there would not have been pressure to work with the PD. The M5S would have been a straightforward opposition. Already with the discussions on forming a government there have been strains and disputes. Up to thirty MPs have expressed a desire for some debate with the PD on a government formula. Yesterday all 160 odd MPs were bussed in 3 coaches to a location outside Rome for a heart to heart with the leader. Reports suggest that things have been smoothed over. It is hard to see how it can maintain such a monolithic structure.

Stalemate

It seems clear that Grillo’s strategy is to be the opposition to a PD/PDL stitched up government. He is not necessarily opposed to new elections, he believes his refusal to deal will not lose him votes on his left. Some polls suggest he may be right but there are some risks. He thinks that the stalemate will encourage more people to vote for the M5S so they can form a government on their own to carry their big reform.

Today’s situation reminds us of one of the great lessons from Ed Miliband’s dad’s book – The State in Capitalist Society (Ralph Miliband). There has been a stalemate in the political system for over a month but the ruling class is still in full control of the levers of power in the economy or other apparatuses of the state. Of course it is a problem for

the ruling class if their political system is not working, particularly if people become angry or oppositional to it. Who knows where it might lead? It is a problem that has become more acute not just in Italy but in many countries faced with the deepest economic crisis since the 1930s. Even Britain is experiencing at a lower level the same alienation of people from the mainstream parties and the establishment's political leadership is more complex than in the past – see the coalition.

The class struggle left in Italy is in some disarray. Indeed the break-up of the Rifondazione project – a left-wing split from the old PCI (part predecessor of the PD) as a result of participation with the PDS in the Prodi government left a big space for the M5S to grow. A significant number of Grillo activists were involved in the social anti-global movements that saw huge mobilisations at Genova among other places. The failure of the Ingroia slate in the recent elections where it failed to reach the quorum necessary for MPs was certainly in part due to the way the mini apparatuses of the radical left like Ferrero's PRC or Di Pietro's Italy of Values party took over a promising coalition around the Cambiare Se Puo appeal. Their main concern was not to build an independently organised electoral coalition linked to a longer term process of building resistance to austerity but rather to do everything to save or regain their representation in parliament. During the election campaign Ingroia spent a lot of time complaining that Bersani was not responding to his offer of collaboration. Predictably its component parts are no longer together.

Vendola's SEL party (Sinistra, Ecologia e Liberta = Left, Ecology and for Liberty), through its alliance with the PD in the elections, now has MPs, indeed the speaker in the lower chamber is a member, and has thus emerged relatively reinforced as a part of the radical left. However its willingness to support a PD that backed all of Monti's austerity policies and to provisionally to have ministers in a new PD led government that Bersani had publicly committed to remain within the Troika framework, means that it is difficult to define it as alternative to the PD. It remains a pressure group from the left to condition somewhat the PD line. Nevertheless it is well placed to recombine with any left wing split from the PD if Renzi were to win the leadership. Then the Vendola leadership would be in a position to build a party with greater influence. Vendola has also been much more active in trying to reach out to the M5S MPs and in trying to find some common ground to work with them on particular issues. It is important to recognise the progressive tendencies in this movement particularly among the local activists. Those who label M5S as fascist or rightwing populist (some in Britain have likened them to UKIP or even talked about Grillosconi) are not just wrong but create a barrier to winning a sector of their base to more class based progressive positions.

Sinistra Critica

It is clearly a time for reflection, rebuilding and perhaps recombination on the radical left. There is an interesting debate that has been publicly aired by the comrades in Sinistra Critica. It revolves around how you judge the situation in the labour movement. Some are arguing that defeats have been so great and the apparatuses of the movement have become so removed from defending the basic interests of working people that we have to talk about a reconstruction of the labour movement. The task of left activists is to take part in all the independent movements and to build up their space and strength. Putting forward the need to build a revolutionary party is less important at this time than these basic tasks. Other comrades say that although the situation is not great it is not as bad as to talk about rebuilding the structures and that as well as building the campaigning movements there are still opportunities to work in trade union oppositions, to develop membership of an openly revolutionary party and to relate actively to other radical left groups.

We can see how the M5S phenomenon, the break up of the Rifondazione project and the experience of the Ingroia campaign provide the framework for this discussion. What is admirable about this debate is that the group has not split and the different positions are openly discussed and arrangements are made for common work and for different perspectives to be tested out. Some lessons for the British left here.

Despite the despair and resignation that exists there is still an abundance of anger reflected in the spectacular growth of the M5S. Organised resistance has not disappeared, there was a very big demonstration in the Val de Susa after the elections, student struggles were extensive last year and the political instability may lead to further openings. One thing is clear, none of the political parties are preparing any sort of break with Monti's austerity policies. For this reason the troika and the Italian oligarchy will work for a PDL/PD government – most of Napolitano's efforts are being made in this direction. A lot depends on whether the Bersani wing of the PD holds out against this and if it does (that is not certain) whether it can win a majority in the party for going back to the polls.

Salerno, Italy, Saturday April 6 2013