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Vol. VII comparative cinema
No. 12
2019

91-97

The Power Vacuum in Italy

“The distinction between fascism as adjective and fascism as noun dates back to the days of the magazine *Il Politecnico*; that is, to the period immediately after the war ...” That is how Franco Fortini begins an article about fascism (in *L’Europeo*, 26-12-1974); an article with which, as they say, I agree entirely. However, I cannot endorse his tendentious prologue. In fact, the distinction between “fascisms” that is made by *Il Politecnico* is neither pertinent nor current. Such a distinction might have remained valid up until ten years ago: when the Christian-Democrat regime still effectively constituted the pure and simple continuation of the fascist regime.

But ten years ago, “something” happened. “Something” that did not exist and was not foreseeable in the time of the *Politecnico*, nor even a year before it happened (or even while it was happening, as we shall see).

Thus, we cannot make a true comparison “chronologically” between “fascisms” – between Fascist fascism and Christian-Democrat fascism – but instead between Fascist fascism and the radically, totally, unpredictably new fascism which was born out of that “something” that happened a decade ago.

As I am a writer, and I write to create controversy, or at least to debate with other writers, allow me to offer a poetical-literary description of that phenomenon which took place in Italy about ten years ago. That would help to simplify and abbreviate my argument (and would probably help to make it more comprehensible).

In the early 1960s, because of air pollution, and particularly water pollution in the countryside (our blue rivers and our limpid irrigation ditches), fireflies began to disappear. The phenomenon was swift and sudden. Just a few years later, fireflies had ceased to exist. They are now a heartrending memory of the past, and an elderly man who can remember them is unable to see himself reflected as he once was in the youth of today, and thus he can no longer utter those lovely yearning laments for past times.

And so, I will call that “something” that happened a decade ago “the disappearance of the fireflies”.

The Christian-Democrat regime went through two distinct phases, which not only had absolutely nothing in common, implying a certain sense of continuity, but they have also become historically unfathomable.

The first phase of this regime (as the Radicals¹ have rightly called it) stretched from the end of the war to the disappearance of the fireflies, and the second goes from the disappearance of the fireflies until the present day. Let us examine them one at a time.

Before the disappearance of the fireflies

The continuity between Fascist fascism and Christian-Democrat fascism is complete and absolute. I will not speak about this, since there is no point in re-stating here what was covered by *Il Politecnico* with reference to the absence of any purge, the continuation of the legal codes, the police violence and the contempt shown for the Constitution. I will focus on a point that has been important with regards to a historical understanding: the democracy with which the Christian Democrats opposed the Fascist dictatorship was shamelessly formal. It was founded on an absolute majority based on the votes of the middle classes and the rural masses, controlled by the Vatican. This control on the part of the Vatican was only possible if it were based on a totally repressive regime. In this world, the “values” that were touted were the same as the ones under fascism: the Church, homeland, family, obedience, discipline, order, thrift and morality. These “values” (as in the times of fascism) were also “real values”; they belonged to the cultures and beliefs of agricultural, pre-industrial Italy. But from the moment they were proclaimed as national “values”, they could only lose all sense of reality and turn into atrocious, stupid, repressive state conformism: the conformism of fascist and Christian-Democrat power. Provincialism, coarseness and ignorance were the hallmarks of the elites and the masses – albeit on a diverse level – during both fascism and the initial phase of the Christian-Democrat regime. The paradigms of that ignorance were the pragmatism and formalism of the Vatican.

All this is clear and unequivocal today, because vain hopes were being nurtured by intellectuals and opponents. It was hoped at that time that all that was not entirely true, and that formal

democracy somehow meant something.

Now, before moving on to the second phase, I must devote a few words to the time of the transition.

During the disappearance of the fireflies

During this period, the distinction between the different forms of fascism, as presented in *Il Politecnico*, could still have worked. In fact, neither the huge country that was taking shape within the country (I am referring to the workers and peasant masses mobilized by the PCI²) nor the leading advanced intellectuals and critics had yet noticed that “the fireflies were disappearing”. They were fairly well informed by sociology (which during those years had called the Marxist analytical method into question), but this was information that was not yet backed up by experience, and which was in essence only formalistic. No one could have suspected the historical reality that the immediate future would bring, nor could anyone identify what was at that time termed “welfare” with the “progress” that was about to fully achieve, for the first time in Italy, what Marx had described as “genocide” in his Manifesto.

After the disappearance of the fireflies

The nationalized and therefore falsified “values” of the old agricultural and paleo-capitalist universe suddenly no longer counted. The Church, homeland, family, obedience, order, thrift, morality – none of these values were no longer worth anything anymore, not even as false values. They survived within the marginalized clergy-fascism (even the MSI³ essentially condemned them), and they were replaced by the “values” of a new type of civilization, completely “other” with respect to the old peasant and paleo-industrial order. The same phenomenon has been experienced by other countries, but the way it took place in Italy was quite unique, because it represented the first real “unification” that our country endured, whereas in other countries it was incorporated in accordance with a certain logic, onto the unification of the monarchy and the subsequent unification resulting from the bourgeois-industrial revolution. The Italian trauma of the contact between the pluralist “archaic” world and the leveling-out caused by industry has perhaps only one precedent: pre-Hitlerian Germany. In Germany, too, the values of the various individual cultures were destroyed by the

violent standardization resulting from industrialization, with the consequent forming of those huge masses who were no longer old (peasants, artisans) and not yet modern (bourgeois), and who came to form the savage, perverse, unpredictable corps of the Nazi troops.

In Italy a similar process is underway, and with even more violence, because the industrialization of the 1970s represents a crucial “mutation” even compared to Germany’s industrialization fifty years ago. We are no longer (as everyone now knows) facing “new times”, but rather a new age in human history: one of those ages in human history that last for millennia. The Italians could not have reacted worse than they did to this historical trauma. In just a few years (and especially in the central-southern regions) they have turned into a people who are degenerate, ridiculous, monstrous and criminal. You only need to go out onto the streets to see this. But of course, in order to understand the changes in the people, you need to love them. Sadly, I loved these Italian people: i.e, my love was both outside the spheres of power (furthermore, in a desperate opposition to them), and outside the populist and humanitarian spheres. It was a real love, rooted in my way of being. Thus I have seen – “with all my senses” – the coercive acts of consumerist power transform and deform the consciousness of the Italian people to a state of irreversible degradation. This did not happen during Fascist fascism, a period in which behavior was totally dissociated from consciousness. “Totalitarian” power insisted and reiterated its impositions of conduct in vain: consciousness could not be involved in them. The fascist “models” were just masks that you could put on and take off. When Fascist fascism fell, everything went back to how it was before. I also saw this in Portugal: after forty years of fascism, the Portuguese people celebrated May Day as if they had held the last one the year before.

And so it is ridiculous that Fortini should return to the distinction between two types of fascism as they were in the early postwar period: the distinction between Fascist fascism and the fascism of this second phase of Christian-Democrat power not only has no equivalent in our history, but probably in all of history.

In any case, I am not writing this article just to argue this point, even though I would really like to. I am in fact writing it for a very different reason, which I will explain below.

All my readers will no doubt have noticed the change in the

Christian-Democrat leaders: in the space of just a few months they have turned into funeral masks. Admittedly, they still show their radiant smiles, which possess an unbelievable sincerity. The blessed light of true good humor shines from their eyes, alternating with the complicit glint of ingenuity and cunning, which is something that apparently pleases voters as much as happiness itself. Furthermore, our leaders carry on imperturbably with their incomprehensible rigmarole, on which we can make out the flatus vocis of the usual stereotyped promises.

Yet in fact they are nothing but masks. I am sure that if we removed these masks, we would find not even a pile of bones and ashes: there would be nothing but a vacuum.

The explanation is simple: there is a dramatic power vacuum in today's Italy. But this is precisely the point: it's not a vacuum of legislative or executive power, nor a vacuum of leadership, no – in the end, it's not a vacuum of political power in any traditional sense, but a power vacuum in itself.

How did we – or rather, “how did these men of power – reach this point?”

The explanation is, once again, simple: the powerful brokers of the Christian-Democrat party have gone from the “stage of the fireflies” to that of “the disappearance of the fireflies” without having noticed. Even though we might consider this to be almost criminal, their lack of awareness on this point was absolute: they never even suspected that the power they wielded and dispensed was not merely undergoing a “natural” stage of evolution, it was radically changing in nature.

They were under the illusion that everything would remain the same in their regime; that they would, for example, be able to rely on the Vatican forever, without realizing that the power they continued to wield and dispense no longer knew what to do with the Vatican, as a center of backward, impoverished peasant life. They were under the illusion that they could still rely on a national army (as their fascist predecessors did) without noticing that the power they continued to wield was already maneuvering to create new armies, transnational in nature, which resembled technocratic police forces. And the same must be said of the family, constrained (and now without the guarantee of continuity it had enjoyed since the fascist period) to thrift, to morality. Now [the family] was subject to the power of consumerism which imposed radical changes

upon it, to the point of making it accept divorce and, therefore, everything else, without limit (or at least up to the limit allowed by the permissiveness of the new power, which was worse than totalitarian in terms of its violently totalizing nature).

That is what the men of power in the Christian-Democrat party have experienced, in the belief that it was they who were managing all this upheaval. They never realized that it was “something else”, something that was unfathomable not only to them but to an entire form of civilization. As always (see Gramsci), only in language could the symptoms be detected. In the transitional stage (that is, “during the disappearance of the fireflies”) the Christian-Democrat bigwigs suddenly changed the way they expressed themselves, adopting a totally new language (which was incidentally as incomprehensible as Latin). This was particularly true of Aldo Moro, a man who, oddly enough, seems to be the one who has been least involved in all the horrible events that have been orchestrated from 1969 to the present day, in an attempt (which so far has been formally successful) to hang on to power at any price.

I say “formally” because, I repeat, the powerful Christian-Democrat brokers, with all their automaton maneuverings and smiles, are covering over the vacuum. Real power carries on without them, and all they have in their hands are those useless instruments that make nothing else real but their mournful double-breasted suits.

Anyhow, a “vacuum” cannot exist in history; it can only be predicated in the abstract and *ad absurdum*. Chances are, in fact, the “vacuum” of which I speak is already being filled in, through a crisis and a reorganization that cannot fail to involve the entire nation. One sign of this happening, for example, is the “macabre” fascination with a *coup d'état*. As if it were simply a question of “replacing” the group of men who have governed us so atrociously for thirty years, leading Italy to an economic, ecological, urban planning and anthropological disaster. In fact, the spurious replacement of these “woodenheads” with other woodenheads (no less mournfully carnivalesque, perhaps even more so), carried out by the artificial reinforcement of the old fascist power apparatuses, would be pointless (and it is clear that in this case the “troops” would already be, in terms of their constitution, Nazis).

The real power which those same “woodenheads” have served for the past decade without recognizing the reality: this is the something that may have begun to fill up the “vacuum”

(also thwarting the possible participation in the government of that great communist nation that was born out of Italy's gangrene: because it's not about "governing"). As yet we only have abstract, fundamentally apocalyptic images of such a "real power": we cannot imagine what "forms" it might take if it were to immediately replace those who have viewed it as a mere "modernizing" of methods. In any case, speaking for myself (if that should be of any interest to the reader), let me simply say that no matter how multinational it might be, I would give the whole of Montedison for a single firefly.

Translated by Ruth Pérez-Chaves, Ph.D.

Published in: PASOLINI, Pier Paolo (1975). *Il vuoto del potere in Italia*. *Corriere della Sera*, 1st February 1975. <https://www.corriere.it/speciali/pasolini/potere.html> [access: April 1st 2019] The first version of this translation was published in the blog Città Pasolini in 2016: <http://cittapasolini.blogspot.com/2016/09/the-vacuum-of-power-il-vuoto-del-potere.html> [access: April 1st 2019].

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1/ Most probably Pasolini is referring to the characterization of "regime" discussed by Ernesto Rossi and Mario Pannunzio, both members of the Partito Radicale (Radical Party), left-wing political party (1955-1989). (Translator's Note).

2/ Partito Comunista Italiano (Italian Communist Party). (Translator's Note)

3/ Movimento Sociale Italiano (Italian Social Movement), neo-fascist political party (1946-1995). Renamed Movimento Sociale Italiano – Destra Nazionale (Italian Social Movement – National Right) in 1972. (Translator's Note)