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Post-political Styles

Mario Perniola

The Decline of "the Political"

The question over the fate of "the political" [*del "politico"*] requires a brief clarification of the notion of "political." As is well known, the thinker who made a fundamental contribution to the definition of the concept of "the political" was Carl Schmitt. According to him, the essence of "the political" is based on the individuation of a real enemy, of a hostility on the basis of which it makes sense to choose alliances. "Inter pacem et bellum nihil est medium," which naturally does not mean that war is inevitable. War is not the goal of "the political": war is the presupposed, ever-present possibility that determines the specific political pose. A conflict acquires political relevance when one side or another has to be taken. Thus the political is, according to Schmitt, the medium par excellence of the earnestness of the decision. The German word *Ernst* (earnestness, seriousness) originally meant *Kampf* (battle). So Schmitt's notion of "the political" is heir to a tradition of thought which includes Hegel, Kierkegaard, and Marx: a tradition

[Translated from the Italian by Rodger Friedman]

which attributes a central role to the problem of conflict.

“Real enemy” does not mean either absolute enemy or conventional enemy. Moral condemnation of the enemy is as foreign to political relationships as the reduction of the enemy to the status of game partner. For Schmitt, the *hostis* is always basically an *alter ego*, a measure of myself, on an equal plane. There remains for Schmitt an essential difference between brigand and partisan, just as there is between dueler and chess player.

Now let’s ask ourselves, what about “the political” in Italy in the course of the last decade? Can an essential conflict be singled out on the basis of which friends and enemies tell themselves apart? Has there been a conflict capable of establishing a net and public division between friends and enemies? Such a conflict existed, for example, during the period from 1945-1968, and found expression in the opposition between fascism and antifascism. Fascism was the *hostis* Schmitt talks about, identifiable without possibility of error. The Italian Republic was born out of the political opposition between fascism and resistance, and during that period any attempt to besmirch such an opposition failed before a furious public. However, the fascist was almost never presented as an absolute enemy. Rather, the effort to find the cultural roots of fascism testifies to the existence of the will to attribute to it a theoretical dignity.

Beginning in 1968 this political opposition, fundamental for Italy, loses its clarity and its perspicuity. There are multiple reasons for the decline of the fascist-qua-enemy. In the first place, the debate [*contestazione*] employs the term “fascist” in a new and improper way, lending it enormous scope: “fascist” becomes a synonym for “authoritarian,” for “legalitarian,” and therefore not only all the parties of the right, but those of the centrist and leftist parliamentary parties too can be defined as more or less “fascist.” In the second place, the parties of the constitutional spectrum, which are recognized in the democratic parliamentary regime, denigrate as “objectively fascist” the counter parties of the extreme left, adding to the confusion. The result is that in Italy from 1968 onward everybody could have or had been insulted for being “fascist.” More essentially, on the level of historiographic study and philosophical reflection, it becomes increasingly evident that fascism belongs to the same political and philosophical civilization that produced its counterparts: the preoccupation with leaving modernity behind tends to prevail over the conflicts internal to modernity. Even neofascism itself, and particularly the new-right groups, tend to develop their own thematics drawn from the new left and end up speaking of a “right-wing Gramsci-ism.”

The crisis of "the political" that began in Italy in 1968 still persists today. It is intimately connected with the weakening of the opposition between fascism and resistance, and with the fact that no other counterposition has had the strength to take its place: not the left-right opposition, because in Italy the multiplicity of parties renders this distinction extremely vague. Nor is sufficient strength found in the counterpositions between revolution and restoration, workers and capital, philosophic and Western, conservative and progressive, or similar oppositions.

Not even the counterpositions between terrorism and antiterrorism, and mafia and antimafia can be considered from Schmitt's point of view as political oppositions, because they transform the adversary into an absolute enemy without even affording that adversary a precise identity. Such oppositions transform the political dimension into a question of criminality or morality and therefore abet the decline of "the political." From 1968 onward Italy has been an extremely interesting laboratory for testing the passage from a political age to a post-political age.

The Forensic Style

This passage is articulated in three moments, which imply a profound transformation of Schmitt's notions of "friend" and "enemy." These three moments can be defined as the *forensic* or *argumentative* [*contestativo*] moment, the *protective* moment, and the *performative* moment. All three are *post-political* moments because they introduce relationships which cannot be reduced to the patterns described by Schmitt. All three place themselves in an atmosphere that implies a profound mutation of the relationships between real and imaginary, therefore they can be defined as *styles*. To whatever extent they have developed profound practical consequences, their effectivity is nevertheless essentially different from that of traditional politics, because their effectivity implicates a much greater involvement of the imagination.

The forensic style substitutes the political relationship between enemy and friend with the post-political one between offender and partner [*reo-compagno*]. At first glance, the argument seems to be an extension of politics toward all of that area that had been traditionally excluded from politics: not only economic relations and labor relations but, above all, private relations and objective institutional relations become objects of a radical critique that extends to the tiniest particulars of daily life and which discovers—in what seem to be the most innocuous habits—meanings and intentions which need to be severely criticized and

stigmatized. To adopt the forensic style [*contestare*] means in effect to open a public debate, producing testimony against whoever is held to be blameworthy. The argument is in fact an exercise in suspicion which exposes the guilty ones wherever they may be and subjects them to trial and critique. The significance of this procedure is not, however, juridical because it does not lead to a sentence, but rather to self-criticism, to an auto-critique. The offender ought to recognize his own guilt and correct his own errors. Accusation is not the prelude to condemnation, but the initial moment of a process of self-liberation which ought to involve all humanity. Contrary to the juridical principle that the accused is held innocent until proven guilty, the offender is guilty by definition right from the start: any attempt at self-defense only aggravates his position. The forensic style therefore has nothing to do with the juridical mentality, which is itself an object of debate.

Likewise, the forensic style, in spite of appearances to the contrary, has nothing to do with "the political," because it establishes a reversible exchange between *reo* and *compagno* that is completely foreign to the relationship between enemy and friend. When contesting, the offender today is the *compagno* tomorrow: accusation is an indispensable tool with which the offender wakes up and liberates himself. War is no longer the presupposed, ever-present possibility, because it is peace, its exact opposite, that assumes that function. The slogan "make love, not war," exhibits an essential aspect of the forensic style [*della contestazione*]. The offender is never a real enemy, but someone who has made a mistake and is able to be re-educated. Faith in the reformability of the offenders never flags. Hence the forensic style is not violent, but rather pedagogical. It places faith in the infinite pliability of man. The forensic style conjoins utopianism with pacifism.

The reversibility of an offender into a *compagno* is, however, subject to the opposite reversal: a *compagno* may turn into an offender. A *compagno* is not the same thing as a political "friend," and is not bound to the cause come life or death. Rather, he is someone who is among the accusers of an offender, during the *petitio*. The contesting group forms itself on the basis of an indirect agreement that exists by way of the critique of an offender. The contesting partner is a *com-petitor*, one of those who converge in the denunciation of an offender. In fact, the indirect character of this alliance does not generate faith, but rather creates competition. The target of a forensic attack hardly falls before the *compagno* is transformed into a competitor, who thus becomes in turn the object of suspicion and critique. Today's *compagno* is therefore

tomorrow's offender, who, tomorrow, may be unmasked.

This reversibility between *compagno* and offender renders the forensic style politically inconclusive. No political party was ever generated by the forensic style, but only myriad alliances and little groups that split up and reform repeatedly. That which unites and divides (politically) cannot be limited to agreement or disagreement over a negative objective. An essential trait of the partisan, of the party man—Schmitt says—is his telluric character, which entails a positive relationship with the earth, with the fatherland, with the nation. The forensic or argumentative style, instead, is international in scope. The accuser believes that partners may be found anywhere, because everywhere there are offenders to be accused *en masse*. This internationalism is accompanied, however, by a radical isolation, unknown in the traditional associations of the past: in effect, the accuser can at any time, in any place, be judged to be an offender. The enemy as *alter ego* is not there for him to serve as a measure, to define a plane of existence; nor can there be a friend who is his ally however different he may be.

The forensic style is a combination of aggressivity and pacification, of radical belligerence and utopian pacifism, of polemics and aesthetics carried in a triumphant emotional tone. When this triumphant *Stimmung* can no longer be maintained, the forensic style caves in on itself like a house of cards. It is not, however, a failure of faith that sooner or later there will come a day when everyone will be *compagni*. What annihilates the accuser is the discovery that, sooner or later, there will come a day when he himself will be accused. To hold off the specter of this enantiothropy, of this overturning, he is ready to accuse his nearest *compagno*: but this only accelerates his ruin.

The Protective Style

The discovery of the reversibility of the categories of friend and foe constitutes the point of departure for the second post-political style. In this case, too, the terms "friend" and "enemy," understood in Schmitt's sense, are completely inadequate. From the moment in which every common point of reference dissolves, not only with reference to a telluric reality but even to a theory, to a conception of the world, or to a cultural form, alliances and discordances are established only out of convenience. The request that one makes to a group is above all a request for protection against whoever impedes that person in the attainment of his goals. The group, therefore, tends to assume the role of a protection agency, of a mafia, of an association without any scope other than that of

aiding its own members. The *associate* [*socio*] takes the place of the partner [*compagno*]. His characteristics are indeterminate: anyone can become an associate of anything. The thematics of liberation and anarchy, which had played an important role in the forensic style, come to be understood in a manner which completely distorts their former meaning. The barrier between *compagno* and delinquent falls, a barrier that had been essential to the revolutionary tradition from its origins up to and including the forensic style. The criminal [*la malavita*] assumes a role and an importance without modern historical precedent, imposing its pragmatics and style of behavior. The protective style is in effect the style of delinquency freed from the strictures of traditional society. The protective style is freed from any accompanying bad conscience. It follows that the enemy is no longer the offender who must be induced to undergo an intense autocritique, the enemy is the *criminal* [*criminale*] to be annihilated, or rather to be transformed into an associate. Thus to the opposition *partner-offender*, there follows a new post-political opposition: that between *criminal* and *associate*.

The protective style extends far beyond the marginal fringes of Italian society. Even more than the forensic style, it has profoundly transformed the entire society. In fact, from the middle seventies onward, the behavior of many groups in all social classes, in all businesses and professions, has been modeled upon it. To enter into the fold of a protection agency, to create one *ex-novo*, or to transform the institutions, the parties and the existing groups into protection agencies has been the principal occupation of whoever has not wanted to be marginalized by the current social processes. The protective style, which in Italy belonged to various regional traditions, has extended itself throughout the nation with profound destructive effects, and in those regions of its origins it has developed into degenerate and more violent forms.

The disappearance of the relationship between enemy and friend and its substitution with that between criminal and associate represents the maximum divergence of the relationship between knowledge and power, upon which Western civilization was founded. From the moment in which the antagonist is deprived of the quality of enemy, of *alter ego*, or of the possibility to be tomorrow's *compagno* (as in the forensic style), he has but one possibility left: to repent and become disassociated. But penitents and renegades are neither friends nor enemies: they are, according to the point of view, only ex-criminals who become associates, or ex-associates who become criminals.

Association implies a reciprocal contempt [*disprezzo*] which is

also contempt for oneself. An alliance which is based only and exclusively upon protection, upon a balance of reciprocal exchange, and sometimes even upon complicity in illegal action, has nothing at all left to do with political alliance. Associates, like the latter-day men whom Nietzsche speaks of, do not establish among each other lines of communication: rather, they wink [*ammiccano*] at each other. What does it mean to wink? Heidegger writes:

to wink means: to give oneself a certain air and make something appear in such a way that one expects a positive outcome, even being reciprocally in agreement, even without an explicit formulation, which will not be held responsible at all for this appearance.

The wink is a fundamental determination of the protective style. The Italian word for winking, *ammiccare*, derives from Latin *ad micare*, to twinkle. The *micare*, the twinkling, the flashing of the eye between associates, implies the secret understanding that only profit counts and that all the rest is nothing but a smoke screen to fool idiots. The showy ostentation of the protective style, the *super-kitsch* with which it cloaks itself, is not only a cream-puff promise of aid and zillion-fold credit, but also the dogma of universal ignominy. The criminal, whether terrorist or mafioso, is a potential associate. His reform, his repentance is taken for granted. The absence of serious goals—which constitutes the prerogative of the protective style—is manifest in the instant reversal of criminal into associate, and in fact the procedure of the protective style is a continuous and rigorous search for new associates and new criminals. That which Heidegger says about the will of will illustrates their characteristics handily:

[it] entails the calculation that changes the goals and then inserts itself provisorily each time, thus the mystification, games of skill, the enquiring spirit of which the will of will is diffident and insidious even toward itself.

In spite of its obstinacy and boastfulness, its arrogant presumptuousness, the *Stimmung* of the protective style is melancholic, if not hysterical and desperate.

Hurrying to repay the favor, the support and the sustenance; in fear of coming out short in the game of giving and having; and the suspicion confronting everyone; all of this hinders the correct valuation of the times and the procedures and causes errors, generates ineffectuality in a game in which everything depends upon practical success. The perfect reversibility between associate and

criminal ends up corroding at the roots will itself, which becomes self-destructive.

The Performative Style

The protective style designates the reduction of language, of knowledge, of *logos* to mere decoration, to enchantment and distraction. The wink between associates and their violence against adversaries have no essential need of language. The farce that surrounds a wink and the invective that surrounds aggression are a bit adventitious and false. The advent of a third post-political style indicates a complete change of direction and the attribution of an essential role to language, knowledge and *logos*. This style may be defined *performative* [*performativo*] because in it attention is drawn to the pragmatics of language, to those phenomena in which *saying* is the same as *doing* something. The operative aspect of language prevails over the declarative and valuational dimensions. It is not so interested in judging how things are or how they ought to be, but in how they might function. The performative style is connected with the informationalization of society, with the crossing of electronics with the instruments of communication, or the production, conservation, and circulation of *data*. Contrary to appearances, it is not in the least a positivistic or scientific style, one that privileges the mechanism, the *esprit de géométrie*. Rather, it occupies itself with the effectiveness of behavior traditionally held to be ineffective, such as forms of courtesy, rituals and ceremonies. *Politesse* provides an essential element to this style.

In order to define the positive relational aspect of the performative style, the categorical determinations of "friend" [*compagno*] and "associate" are completely inadequate. Their place is taken by the *colleague*, one who is hooked up to the *network* and to the circulation of *data*. The performative colleague is distinguishable by the ability to emit new data and to circulate the data he receives. The word implicitly contains all the meanings of the Latin verb *lego*, whose primary definition is to collect that which is scattered, but which nevertheless is already there. No utopian tension animates the performative style. Rather, it sends on, transforms, renders transmittable the data with which it is concerned. But it does not create data *ex novo*. In the second place, *lego* means to re-unite, to put together, but not in the sense of reducing the multiple to a single identity; rather, in the sense of ordering it for use as in a collection, a series, an archive. The third meaning of *lego* is to choose. So there is no question of the indiscriminate acceptance of

everything, nor of a choice in Schmitt's sense of *Entscheidung*, of decisions which divide and separate inexorably. The Latin word *electio* in the sense of taking possession of what is given is much more appropriate to the performative style. And finally *lego* means to read. The performative style implies a reevaluation of the importance of knowledge in general and of philosophy in particular.

To define the negative relational aspect of the performative style, the categorical determinations of "enemy," "offender" and "criminal" reveal themselves to be completely inadequate. The adversary of performativity is the one who refuses to take part in the clique, the stranger, the unclassifiable one, the lone wolf, the peculiar, the *unique*. The opposition between *colleague* and *loner* [*unico*] is the most reversible one that can be imagined, not only because the plurality and the search for new kinds of cliques imply by definition the existence of ample room for singularity, but also because the loners themselves form a series, a group among the others. In this aspect the performative style implies that extreme attention is devoted to the relationship between singularity and duplication and multiplication. We can say, therefore, that the performative style represents the most radical manifestation of the post-political.

However, we should not exclude the possibility that the performative style may contain in itself the premises for a return to "the political." Such a thing could happen from the moment in which the adversary of the colleague comes to assume the role of the *barbaric*. The opposition between colleague and loner distorts itself into one between civility and barbarism. Barbarism would be everything which happens just once, which is out of order, which creates a rupture in the intelligibility of the network, it is the *prodigium*, the phenomenon which generates horror. At the opposite pole are found all those who believe in the existence of a unity among individuals as an essential good to be defended at any cost. The opposition between friend and enemy would then show up as an opposition between "the political" and "the barbaric."

It is interesting to observe that the premises of this development, which as things stand remain hypothetical, are already present in Schmitt, in his little book on *Hamlet*. There Schmitt makes reference to the constitution of "the political" in its triple aspect of politics, police and *politesse* in seventeenth-century England. The return of the political must go through the choice posed by Schmitt as the title of that work: *Hamlet or Hecuba?* Whoever chooses Hamlet chooses the power of knowledge, civility, the information and media [*telematico*] order, social grouping, in short,

the political. Whoever chooses Hecuba chooses the weakness of knowledge, the aesthetic lament and moral protest against the evil of the world, isolation, in short, *the barbaric*.

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