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Newell, JL

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A New Revolution? The Italian Case

JAMES L. NEWELL

Introduction

To establish the case that the recent riots and upheavals in Greece can potentially be seen as the prelude to a much broader uprising that could sweep Europe and threaten the current political order, requires showing two things. These are: (a) that the Greek events have counterparts in other countries and (b) that both sets of events – those in Greece and those elsewhere – threaten the current order. Addressing both these sets of issues in their entirety is more than is possible here but we can address part of the second set by looking at the significance of recent protest in Italy. Italy is one of Europe's four largest countries in terms of population and GDP, alone accounting for 12 percent of the combined population of the 27 member states and 12 percent of the combined GDP. So it is unlikely that the Greek events have a wider and non-trivial significance unless it can be shown that among the other countries of the EU there are order-threatening events in Italy too.

The most significant of recent waves of protest were ones that took place in October and November last year, just before the Greek events, following the publication of government proposals, which have since become law, for the reform of schools and universities. To assess the meaning and significance of the protest we begin by asking: Who was protesting and with what methods? Against what were they protesting? How many of them were there? What were the consequences?

The anti-Gelmini protests

The protests were mainly of school and university students, teachers and parents but included workers beyond the education sector. They were called the anti-Gelmini protests after the minister for education, Mariastella Gelmini, responsible for the proposals that provoked them. There were, in a range of major cities, a number of street demonstrations, involving occasional clashes with the police. There were also strikes and occupations of university buildings. The internet featured highly – as a forum for the exchange of ideas (through blogs and web sites); as an organisational tool (through the publication of information about forthcoming protests and the distribution of leaflets and other material), and as a space for the creation of a sense of community (for example by making possible the uploading of photographs and videos of protests through sites such as YouTube). None of the political parties had a very high profile in the protests.

The catalyst for the protests, the aforementioned education reforms, involved three main sets of measures. One concerned cuts in expenditure involving a reduction in staff numbers, which the Government sought to defend on the grounds of: the changing demography of the school and university sectors; Italy's high level of public debt, and the

promise that a proportion of the savings would be re-allocated to the sector from 2010 in the form of new incentive payments for teachers. A second concerned procedural changes affecting universities, allowing them to become private foundations and introducing alterations to the procedures for the recruitment of staff, supposedly designed to increase the levels of meritocracy in the system. The third involved rules changes: marks for conduct as well as for academic achievement were to count in decisions about school students' progression (supposedly to combat bullying); a kind of uniform (*grembiule*) was to be reintroduced in elementary schools (supposedly to eliminate social differences between pupils).

In terms of numbers involved, the biggest single set of protests probably took place on 30 October when the trade unions brought school and university staff out on strike and there were protest marches in several cities, with the one in Rome involving a million people according to the organisers. After this date the number of protests appeared to decline in size and frequency and the proposals that had given rise to them passed into law on 29 October as far as the schools were concerned and on 8 January as far as the universities were concerned.

The social and cultural context

That is as far as the bare facts go. In order to assess their significance we have to view them against the background of the social and cultural context in which they took place. From the present point of view the most salient features are threefold: first, the emergence and growth in recent years of what has been called the 'new associationism'; that is, the growing number of non-governmental, voluntary and co-operative associations, which appears to be linked to a decline in the ideological and religious certainties of the Cold War period – of profound significance for Italian society as home to what was once the West's largest communist party – together with changing patterns of consumption, bringing with them a growth in solidarity and loyalties outside the family.

In the second place, the apparent growth in civic commitment that seems to be implied by the new associationism has been accompanied by a growth in protest activity with – for example – the number of street demonstrations of various kinds rising from 3,576 in 2000, to 7,022 in 2004 (Censis, 2005: 13). And there are very good reasons for viewing the two as parts of a single phenomenon, one of which is what Andrews (2005: 7) refers to as the absence of a 'sense of state'. Perpetuated by the conduct of the pre-1994 governing parties, first, and by the populism of Berlusconi, second, such absence can be thought of as a cultural trait deriving from the encouragement of clientele practices rooted in familistic assumptions that sometimes spill over into instances of high-level corruption and collusion with criminal organisations. In such a context acts of civic engagement, or activity that in some way implies a commitment to the welfare of the collectivity, inevitably carry connotations of opposition to conventional politics and to the status quo. In the context of a Prime Minister seeking explicitly to use Parliament to pursue laws with no apparent purpose beyond the resolution of his private legal

difficulties, the activities tend – I would argue – to carry the very specific connotations of opposition to the government of the centre right.

In the third place, it is possible to see the rise in protest activity as one indicator of the emergence, during what can be called ‘the Berlusconi years’, of a ‘new opposition’ whose centre of gravity is in the social movements rather than in political parties; whose most dramatic expression to date has been the Genova anti-capitalist protest in July 2001; whose adherents have been driven by themes of social justice, traditional to the left, but also by themes (such as defence of an independent media) that extend beyond it. It is a new opposition that challenges stereotypes about the role, in Italian society, of the Church – which was a focus for protests against the war in Iraq, given the Pope’s own opposition – and about the position of the South. According to the stereotypes, this is an area ‘characterised by a lack of civic commitment among [its inhabitants] who supposedly react passively to the influence which the Mafia exercises over the territory’ (Parini, 2000: 10). In recent years emergence of the new associationism has gone hand in hand with a seeming decline in power and influence of the Mafia and other organised crime groups.

The significance of the anti-Gelmini protests

Against this background, I believe rather firmly that the recent protests in Italy have not demonstrated the scale of the political crisis in Europe, if such there is, but are closer to representing a continuation of normal domestic politics. I have five reasons for believing this.

In the first place there is, as I have already implied, nothing new about the recent protests: they are part of a general trend towards a growth in protest activity in general and, as any reasonably well-informed Italian citizen, reflecting back on the events of recent years will be able to recall, the period since Genova has seen other waves of protest as striking as those of October and November 2008. They include school-students’ protests against another set of government-sponsored education reforms earlier in the decade. Then the protests gave rise to a movement called *la Pantera* (or ‘the Panther’) just as the more recent ones have been referred to as *l’Onda* (or ‘the Wave’) as if to convey the idea that there is some kind of organisational permanence underlying the protests, but which is in fact difficult to discern. They include the protests of the so-called *Girotondi*; the enormous demonstrations and strikes against government proposals to abolish article 18 of the Workers’ Statute; protests against the war in Afghanistan; the European Social Forum; the protests against the invasion of Iraq, with their rainbow-coloured ‘peace flags’ hung from innumerable balconies up and down the country; the protests, in Val di Susa, against the proposed high-speed rail link between Lyon and Turin.

In the second place, therefore, the October and November protests are – I would contend – part of the normal way in which politics is carried on in Italy. Although this is an assertion I find difficult to establish with solid evidence, I am very much of the

impression that street demonstrations, strikes and so on are a much more routine aspect of interaction between social and political actors in Italy than in, perhaps many, other West European countries. For example, with a highly institutionalised system of industrial relations, national strikes in this or that sector and even general strikes are established and accepted features of the periods that precede the conclusion of national-level pay agreements. Presumably, these forms of demonstration assist the processes of bargaining by providing peaceful confirmation to all concerned of exactly how much power can be wielded by each of the contracting parties. As rough and ready indicators of the normalcy of the recent education-reform protests, two features spring to mind. First, though they were succeeded by the Greek events very shortly afterwards, the latter do not appear to have done anything to prevent the Italian wave subsiding. Second, inserting the term '*onda*' into Google, in February, produced, as one of the first hits, a blog inviting its visitors to post answers to the question 'What, in your opinion, has happened to 'the wave'?'

If one asks why protest activity appears to be a more routine form of political interaction in Italy than elsewhere, then due account has to be taken of the relative weakness of the authorities in that country. This is a long-standing feature of the Italian political system, one whose roots can be traced back at least as far as Unification itself, and it has a number of implications for protest. One is that if citizens' lack confidence in the strength and impartiality of the gatekeepers to institutionalised channels of access to policy making, then they more likely to engage in protest than they would otherwise have been. Another is that the Italian authorities, under pressure to give proof of their ability effectively to remain sovereign within their territory have on several notable occasions in the post-war period managed protest rather repressively. However, perhaps because of the very same weakness, they have also historically been rather receptive to the substantive demands made by protestors. For example

- 1969 and 1970, in the immediate aftermath of the workers' and students' protests, saw
 - improvements to the pensions system,
 - the passage of the so-called Workers' Statute (which among other things established the right of workers to meet and organise at their place of work),
 - the introduction of divorce and the legislation necessary to give effect to the constitutional provisions providing
 - for the establishment of decentralised (i.e. regional) government and
 - for abrogative referenda.
- In 1976, the movement for urban renewal was successful in obtaining passage of law no. 278. This increased the opportunities for popular participation in local decision-making by providing for the election of decentralised, neighbourhood councils in municipalities of over 30,000 inhabitants.
- In the course of the 1980s, a large number of the social circles set up in the wake of the youth movement of 1977 gained official recognition as associations able to fill a number of the gaps in the provisions of the welfare state. A number of the circles even received public subsidies (della Porta, 1996: 47, 79, 82).

My point, quite simply, is that protest activity is more likely to be resorted to, and therefore the more likely to be a routine feature of political interaction, the more successful it is.

In the third place, a not insignificant feature of the October and November demonstrations was the absence of any kind of high-profile alliance between the protesters themselves and any significant party-political actors. On the contrary, as a journalist seeking to provide a sketch of the outlooks of the students noted,

Of Italian politicians there is not a single mention. [There is] opposition to the centre right and diffidence towards Veltroni and the Pd (Portanova, Riva and Schiavulli, 2008: 79).

...that is, the Democratic Party, the main party of the centre left. In this respect, the demonstrations seem to have reflected the earlier protests I mentioned in that like them, they too have challenged the authority of the centre-left parties. As one student declared: 'Let them not try again to take charge of the protest; it won't be accepted' (*e non provino ancora a metterci il cappello sopra, non passa*) (Portanova, Riva and Schiavulli, 2008: 79). This reflects a very strong anti-political element in the protest movement, anti-political attitudes having acquired growing salience generally in Italian political culture in recent years. By anti-political attitudes I mean attitudes that involve a rejection of conventional political activities, politicians and parties – typically in ways that allow no appeal: either established politicians' competition masks more fundamental collusion between them, denying the people any real choice, or else political competition prevents the resolution of the people's problems by placing an obstacle in the way of a sense of common purpose. Filippo Andreatta, Professor of International Relations at the University of Bologna, summed up the anti-political mood well. When asked whether he thought the anxieties expressed by the student protestors were closer to being existential or political, he replied:

I would say a pre-political anxiety. I see in it the lack of any hope rather than a political objective. Unlike in 1968, the protest has not been ignited by any ideology. It is directed against the political class as a whole, which is not seen as representative of the country at large ((Portanova, Riva and Schiavulli, 2008: 75).

The significance of this is that a movement that goes beyond a certain point in rejecting politics must, surely, weaken itself by undermining its ability itself to act politically.

The fourth reason why I would downplay the significance of the recent protests for the prospects of radical change is that they came at a time when it was reasonable to expect an upsurge in protest activity *anyway*, this as a result of last year's general election. This resulted in the exclusion from Parliament, for the first time since the war, of any representatives of the socialist or communist left (as a result of a combination of the electoral law and popular disappointment with the performance of the outgoing centre-left government under Romano Prodi). Unless the centre-left parties that *did* win seats could themselves represent the concerns of the supporters of the excluded parties,

then it was reasonable to anticipate that frustrations would be expressed through non-institutional, protest activity – which after all represents a channel of influence to which groups are obliged to have recourse when they cannot influence policy through institutional channels such as parties. Unfortunately, the main party of the centre left, the Pd, did not look well placed to take on the task of representing supporters of the radical left since its leader had decided, since before the election, to adopt a notably restrained and moderate stance on most things as part of his strategy of seeking to expand his party's electoral base towards the centre of the political spectrum.

A final reason why I would downplay the significance of the recent protests for the prospects of radical change is that, even if the protesters had established links with significant party-political actors, the actors most sympathetic to their cause – the parties of the radical left expelled from Parliament – would not, precisely because of that expulsion, have been in a state to act as any kind of effective spearhead for the protesters. The election outcome meant that they suffered a heavy financial setback – as the system of public funding of parties ties the amounts available directly to vote shares – which in turn meant that they suffered a significant organisational setback; for public funding largely compensates for the difficulties the parties have – as revealed, for example, by long-term membership decline – in maintaining themselves through their own efforts (Newell, 2009). Added to which were the obstacles to their acting as effective protest vehicles created by the deep disagreements emerging at their election post-mortem conferences in the summer of 2008.

Conclusion

What I conclude, contemplating the issues I have discussed, are two things. First, assessing the significance of something like protest in Italy confirms for me the importance of adopting interpretive approaches to the analysis of other societies. Too often in the study of other countries researchers make mistakes in their assessments of the significance of events because they fail to adopt methods and methodologies – generally qualitative – embodying sensitivity to the meanings that actors *themselves* attach to their actions. Rather, they adopt quantitative, survey-based and comparative approaches, imposing their *own* frameworks of understanding on the reality that they seek to study – with the result that ‘the characteristics attributed to [the] foreign culture....[differ little] from the folklore or prejudices about the foreign country which already exist in [their] own society’ (Scheuch, 1967, quoted by Dogan and Pelassy, 1990: 70). A street demonstration in Italy does not have the same meaning as an apparently similar event in the UK or elsewhere – so the mere fact we have events that can seemingly be measured and quantified in the same terms between two or more societies, does not mean that we can draw the same inferences from them when it comes to conclusions about their significance for some general, cross-national trend.

Second, there exists a very simple test that we can apply to assess the significance for radical or revolutionary change of a group or movement and it is known as Michael Mann's IOTA model. In *Consciousness and Action among the Western Working Class*,

Mann sets out four conditions that have to be fulfilled if classes are to exist as compartmentalised social collectives cemented by a shared sense of group consciousness. These conditions can be used to assess the potential of any group to overturn the political order. First, a shared 'identity' must exist between the group's members. Second, this identity must include a perception of 'opposition' to other group interests. Third, these components must combine in a 'totality' that defines the group members' social situation and society in general. Fourth, an 'alternative' to the existing power relations must be conceived. From what I can see, the recent protest movement in Italy has managed only the first two conditions – and then but partially. The third and fourth have never come anywhere near to being fulfilled. Therefore, I am not persuaded that, in any meaningful sense of the term, there is, at the moment, any real potential for radical political change here.

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