

Paul Ginsborg. A Professor as a Friend

Letizia Airos Soria (April 12, 2009)



i-Italy met with Paul Ginsborg at New York University's Casa Italiana Zerilli- Marimò. It was a unique opportunity to reflect on Italian democracy and the threats it currently faces. Is what Alexis de Tocqueville wrote about the "tyranny of the majority" still important?

He has an extraordinary style. We watch him from a distance as he speaks with NYU graduate students. It is rare for anyone who has attended universities in Italy to see such prestige together with such straightforwardness.

Young people regard him with admiration, but he does not look down on them from on high. He converses with them good-naturedly; he makes friendly jokes. He is surrounded by friends, but not those who belong to his "court" as we frequently see with Italian university professors.



No, one would be hard-pressed to find a Paul Ginsborg in Italian academia. It would be just as difficult to attend a conference in Italy like the one that took place last week-end at [Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò](#) [2] where professors of Paul Ginsborg's caliber presented alongside emerging young talent.

Paul Ginsborg is Professor of Contemporary European History at the [University of Florence](#) [3]. He is the author of several books on Italy, including "A History of Contemporary Italy: Society and Politics", 1943-1988 (2003) and "Silvio Berlusconi: Television, Power, and Patrimony" (2007). In 2002, he founded the political movement "Laboratorio per la Democrazia" (Laboratory for Democracy) in Florence, along with many other political, academic, and public figures such as Professor Ornella de Zordo and Senator Pancho Pardi. The initiative has two main objectives: to protect Italian democracy and to contribute to its renewal.

A few of us from i-Italy's editorial staff had the opportunity to sit down with him before his keynote speech at the symposium "Denuncia: Speaking up in Modern Italy". We talked with him about democracy in Italy, the role of mass media in contemporary democratic politics, the new president of the United States Barack Obama, as well as other social and political issues such as immigration and racism.

At the table, his English mannerisms were intertwined with very Italian gestures. His hands moved gracefully while he spoke. As his eyes quickly passed from one speaker to the next, it was clear that he was very interested in this "New York" topic of conversation that was rarely explored, and that he was full of desire to know and understand.

THE TYRANNY OF THE MAJORITY

[Alexis de Tocqueville](#) [4] discussed his theory of the "tyranny of the majority" in his masterpiece [Democracy in America](#) [5]. Could his work and thoughts also apply to modern Italy? Should we fear the possibility of a tyranny of the majority in Berlusconi's political era?

"I think it is a very legitimate fear in Italy now that Berlusconi is prime minister. There is a great simplification of the system: Italian political life is becoming bipartisan and it is forming in a way that is not in line with the traditions of the Italian republic. Before, as you know, we had proportional representation, with the active presence of minorities within the Italian parliament being one of its fundamental characteristics. This system was a good safeguard against the tyranny of the majority but, on the other hand, it allowed the formation of government by coalitions which are usually slow and unstable. They are often real disasters: just think of what happened to Prodi's government with its 11 parties. This is one of the reasons why Berlusconi is pushing for a bipartisan system and he has public opinion on his side.

We must also remember that other major parties, the Partito Democratico more than the others, support this transformation. The bipartisan system would benefit the largest single party in the Chamber of Deputies and would create a real tyranny of the majority since the minor parties would be excluded from representation. This is why I consider Tocqueville's fear a legitimate one for modern Italy."

CIVIL SOCIETY AND POLITICAL LIFE

In his masterpiece, Tocqueville also stressed that the involvement of civil society in the political life of a country is one of the main pillars of democracy. Is this still true?

"Tocqueville saw in America something that he did not see in France or in other European countries: citizens took certain issues into their own hands on a daily basis and formed active clubs and associations which were skeptical of government, and this in some ways diluted the influence of the family. He considered the middle area of civil society to be incredibly important to the quality of democracy, and I think this is also true today for modern Italy. The activities of anti-mafia



organizations such as the ARCI – Associazione Ricreativa e Culturale Italiana (Recreational and Cultural Italian Association), Comitati per la Difesa della Costituzione (Committees for the Defense of the Constitution) are outstanding. They are active in the centre-north of the county, and are also considered to be an immensely rich cultural resource recognized by many authorities. However, their efforts are still somewhat inefficient since they don't translate into the political arena."

[Robert Putnam](#) [6] discovered that there is a decline of civic involvement in the political life in America and other industrial nations. Will this phenomenon be particularly dangerous in Italy?

"Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* is a great book – there is no question about it. Let me give you two comments. First of all, Putnam talked about 'social capital' rather than 'civil society.' He never used this latter term. For him it is always a question of people getting together; it does not matter what for. The nature of the civil society, on the other hand, consists of so-called "normative values": it believes in tolerance, peace, and in horizontal rather than vertical relationships. Social capital is not that; it is people living in a neighborhood and saying "hello" in the morning. Thus there is a conceptual distinction that we have to make between social capital and civil society; it may seem academic but it is not.

Italy has many active social associations. Since things are not going well for the country, there are strong associations and an active grassroots movement.

To go back to Putnam's book, let's remember that it was written in 2000, before Barack Obama's extraordinarily mobilizing campaign. America has finally returned to give lessons in democracy to rest of the world for the first time in many decades. This is why the categories in Putnam's work should be revised: what he didn't expect to happen actually happened, and we had this amazing, massive social involvement in a campaign for the presidential primary."

LABORATORIO PER LA DEMOCRAZIA AND OTHER CIVIC MOVEMENTS

You collaborated with public figures and academics such as Professor Ornella de Zordo and Senator Pancho Pardi to found the movement *Laboratori per la Democrazia* (Laboratories for Democracy). What explanation can we give for this kind of social initiative's inability to take root?

"The relationship between social movements and the political arena is very complicated and there is not always an easy solution. Social associations by and large do not and cannot last, unless people become full-time organizers. They have their own lives and full-time jobs, so meeting five times a week – as such organizations would require – would just be impossible for them.

These movements could continue only if the political arena were different. If we started our own party, we could have probably represented only 3-5% of the electorate; we would have become just one more of the incredibly numerous little parties in Italy. On the other hand, what would have been the use to enter an unreformed political arena? It is a caste system with its own rules and regulations. To enter that world, you should leave your original job, become a professional politician, and dedicate yourself solely to that path. The political arena has become so hostile that the shift from social movement to politics does not take place.

The left wing parties should do something about this in the first place. I have often spoken with some of the representatives, people like Fassino and D'Alema, and I have asked them to work together so that the political arena could help and sustain the *Laboratorio per la Democrazia* and all the other organizations by recognizing them as valuable groups. All they offered to do was organize more meetings. They did not want to change anything.

What should change? It seems to us that, besides the possibility of creating your own party, you have only one solution: get some of your people into their parties...

The Left should create the right conditions in which the social movements could flourish. We could



not just go and become members of other political parties. We would have to adapt to their dynamics and we would most likely stop fighting for the causes that we joined these political institutions to support in the first place.

There is still, however, one other possibility: questioning the entire paradigm of what politics is, and its relation to everyday life. We should start at a local level. Politics have already changed over time and people's faith in politics has declined. We must change the political institutions and let social society enter them and influence their activities. We must let this huge movement get through the very narrow neck of the bottle and change the political arena.

DEMAGOGY BETWEEN BERLUSCONI AND OBAMA

You consider Berlusconi to be a demagogic leader. Do you feel the same about Obama? Is he or could he become a dangerous populist phenomenon?

"There are many dangers, and he could fail to carry out his program and keep his promises. But still, what happened in 2008-2009 as a model of democratic practice will be reported in political science and history textbooks. There is no question about it. He has made history, and he did it in the most spectacular way. In any event, we cannot expect him to be the grassroots leader he was in Chicago; as the president of the United States he can no longer be an activist."

INTERNET AND OTHER SOCIAL NETWORKS

You stress that television has played an important and dangerous role in creating the kind of isolation that Putnam wrote about, and that it has caused a decline in social involvement. Could the Internet and the new social networks contrast this tendency?

"It could. We have to consider that nowadays the only screen in a family's home is no longer the television; we turn on the computer screen much more often. The Internet, by the way, is not always progressive. Huge portions of it are not modern at all, and we still have an infinite number of sites offering entertainment and pornography. Plus, I do not think that the Internet is an effective place to dialogue. I still believe that there is no substitute for face-to-face meetings. They are occasions to learn, to compromise, and to reach conclusions. The Internet and email, on the other hand, are very good for organizing but very bad for discussions. They are not places for meaningful conversations and extemporaneous dialogues. They do not offer people the opportunity to engage each other."

ITALY, IMMIGRATION, AND RACISM

Italy has been a land of emigration for the longest time, a place which people have left to find a better life elsewhere. Unfortunately, Italians were not always welcomed in their new homeland. In the United States especially, they suffered racial discrimination for a long time. Isn't it strange to see people who have remained in Italy, but whose relatives emigrated and settled in other countries, that are racist today and refuse to accept new immigrants?

"People never learn from history, even their own history. As an example, let me tell you about my father. He was a Jewish doctor in London and suffered a lot of anti-Semitism in the 1930s. But in the 1960s when Indians immigrated to London, he became racist towards them, seemingly forgetting his own history and the Holocaust that killed many of his relatives. People never learn. When they see the "other," it is a "different other," so they will not help to fight discrimination."

We are struck by his passion when he speaks. We leave him with one final question: Why did an English citizen decide to dedicate his life's work to Italy?

"I fell in love with Italy when I was just a child. In the summertime, my father would drive me and the rest of the family all the way from London to Forte dei Marmi in Tuscany."



And we learn something else about the professor. He describes his days there as moments of “liberation” and absolute joy that gave him the opportunity to begin his “romance” with the country that later on would become his homeland.

The last surprise for us came when he proudly announced: “I have been an Italian citizen for over a month.”

(Article in collaboration with Marina Melchionda. Edited by Giulia Prestia)

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