ecpr PRESS

Croce, Gramsci, Bobbio and the Italian Political Tradition

Richard Bellamy

ecpr PRESS

Introduction

Studying the Italian Political Tradition

The Italians can stake a reasonable claim to have invented modern politics. From ancient Rome onwards, they conceived politics as the product of the competition for power between different social groups pursuing diverse and often incompatible goals, with the political arts concerned with the management of that competition and the disagreements and conflicts it produces. Italian politicians and theorists of politics alike, the two often being one and the same, were all too aware of the gap that often exists between the ideals we hold and the realties that stand in the way of their implementation. They also saw how the need to engage in real politics can alter the character of those political ideals – often for the worse but also, in so far as it can motivate a willingness to compromise with others to accommodate their ideals as well as one's own, for the better. In various ways, this contrast between political ideals and the reality of politics runs through these essays and the ideas of the thinkers they examine.

The pieces collected here do not come close to constituting a history of the Italian political tradition. Among many omissions, the most notable are the absence of any treatment of the political thought of either the Renaissance or, more glaringly for this volume, the *Risorgimento*.[1] Along with two chapters dealing respectively with the two major figures of the Neapolitan and Milanese Enlightenments, this volume offers at best a discussion of certain core ideas of the main political thinkers of the post-unification period. As a way of contextualising these latter pieces, Chapter One provides an overview of social and political theory in Italy circa 1890–1945. However, all the thinkers explored here engaged with and developed certain motifs that were characteristic of a longer, distinctively Italian, political tradition. The first part of this introduction, therefore, briefly sketches these themes and indicates how they shaped the thought of the writers examined in this book.

---

1.   The one *Risorgimento* figure I have tentatively attempted to explore is Giuseppe Mazzini, and at one time had thought of producing a new edition of his *Duties of Man* but failed to interest a publisher in the project. Fortunately, Nadia Urbinati managed to do so – *see* S. Recchia and N. Urbinati (eds) *A Cosmopolitanism of Nations: Giuseppe Mazzini's Writings on Democracy, Nation Building, and International Relations*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2010. For my own attempts at some sketchy reflections on his thought, see the following review essays: 'Writing for the cause', [review of D. M. Smith, *Mazzini*, Yale University Press], *TLS*, Aug 5 1994, p. 3; 'Contemporary reflections on Mazzini's *Thoughts Upon Democracy in Europe*', *Il Pensiero Politico*, 36, 2003, pp. 122–4; and 'Mazzini' in E. Craig (ed.), *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy On Line,* London, Routledge, 2003, http://www.rep.routledge.com/article/DC112

The second part of this introduction addresses more methodological and personal issues. It describes the motivations that led to the composition of the individual articles and chapters collected in this volume. Re-reading these essays, I became aware that they themselves reflected a certain historical context – that of the academic and political discussions of the 1980s and early 1990s involving the liberal-communitarian debate, on the one hand, and the reaction of the British left to both eleven years of Mrs Thatcher and the collapse of the Soviet bloc and with it, if slightly later, the waning of the allure of Western Marxism, on the other. They also arose out of a belief that history could both be politically engaged and make a contribution to contemporary philosophical debates. As the subtitle of my later study of *Liberalism and Modern Society* was to put it, these essays formed 'an historical argument' in both a methodological and substantive sense that I attempt to sketch here.

Political thought in Italy[2]

A self-consciously Italian political tradition only developed in the nineteenth century, when the *Risorgimento* inspired a number of contrasting visions of a united Italy. Prior to that, political theorists tended to identify with the regimes and traditions of a given region and were often employed by local rulers to support their claims to power. Nonetheless, one can detect three general themes that recur from the post-Roman period up to the present. The first theme concerns the competing attractions of the two Romes, not only in the straightforward form of Emperor versus Pope and later the Church versus the anticlerical supporters of the secular state, but also in the guise of the opposition between the active and the contemplative life, social emancipation and heavenly salvation. The second theme relates to the respective strengths and weaknesses of *signorie* and communes, monarchies and republics – an opposition that likewise broadened into a more general contrast between authoritarian and democratic rule, force and consent. The first theme reflects the fact, peculiar to the Italian situation, that the papacy operated as a territorial as well as a spiritual power. The second is equally specific to Italy in that it is a classical theme which acquired new life with the rise of the city-states and principalities in the later Middle Ages. The third theme arises from the struggles in which these polarized conceptions of politics partook and that they partly generated: namely, a recurrent linking of the idea of Italian unity with order and an end to sectarian and inter-state strife, on the one hand, and to the foreign domination that often accompanied them, on the other. All three themes were also at various times linked to the contrast between a more secular, democratic and industrial north and a more religious, feudal and agrarian south; the unification of Italy required the leadership of the one and its absorption of the other, with most of Italy's problems stemming from the north's difficulties in fully doing so.

---

2.   This section draws on my entry 'Political theory', in P. Hainsworth and D. Robey (eds), *The Oxford Companion to Italian Literature*, Oxford, OUP, 2003.

These themes are intertwined, mixing in all available combinations as circumstances changed, and some of them at least can be found in all the significant Italian political thinkers – be they of a broadly empiricist or rationalist persuasion. Thus, the autocratic ambitions of the papacy between the thirteenth and fifteenth century engendered an intermittent conciliarist reaction within the Church, which urged the need for consultation with the Council of Bishops, an argument that drew on and fed into debates about the benefits of oligarchical and republican governance in the communes. Likewise, the theocratic aspirations of popes to establish a right to the temporal power of the Roman Empire, and to assert their spiritual ascendancy over all civil rulers, came to be matched by similar claims to a universal secular authority on the part of emperors. From the beginning, communes and principalities aligned themselves with both camps – most notably in the clash between Guelfs and Ghibellines. These ideological battles continued in new configurations up until the *Risorgimento*, when the neo-Guelfism of Antonio Rosmini-Serbati and, most particularly, of Vincenzo Gioberti, who advocated that the papacy should take the lead in Italian unification, was counterposed by the largely anticlerical views of liberal monarchists and radical democrats, notably Giuseppe Mazzini, and then endured as the post-war rivalry between communists and Christian democrats.

The clash between Church and Empire, commune and principality, informs the writings of the three major political thinkers of the Middle Ages and Renaissance: Dante Alighieri, Marsilio da Padova, and Niccolò Machiavelli. All worked within the largely secular and neo-Aristotelian paradigm of politics that had been established by Thomas Aquinas. Writing in the wake of Henry VII's abortive Italian expedition, Dante envisaged him taking on the mantle of the Roman Empire and establishing the universal peace and political unity between the different peoples of the world necessary for the collective enterprise of human knowledge and culture to achieve its full potential. Marsilio, by contrast, in the *Defensor pacis* (1324), framed his case against the disruptiveness of clerical pretensions to rule in the context of communal assertions that popular government was the bastion of freedom against tyranny. Yet the 'Defender of the Peace' proved to be his work's dedicatee, Ludwig of Bavaria, in his successful Italian invasion of 1327–30. However, the full separation of Church from state in the form of a neat distinction between politics and morals, Christian or otherwise, only came with Machiavelli a century afterwards. For him, politics was essentially instrumental to the establishment of order and civic liberty, depending on qualities that were specific to the political arts. Although an advocate of the commune in his *Discorsi* (c. 1517, published posthumously in 1531), the conclusion of the *Principe* (1513, published posthumously in 1532) repeats the call for a princely figure capable of liberating Italy from the flood of foreign invasions.

The elaboration of Machiavellian '*ragioni di stato*' (reason of state) by thinkers such as Gaspare Scioppio, Giovanni Bolero and Ludovico Zucolo continued into the seventeenth century. It was counter-posed by the religious, if heretical, Platonic utopianism of Giovanni Bruno and Tommaso Campanella. The Counter-Reformation gave new impetus to the battle between Church and state, culminating in the defences of toleration and civil authority by Paolo Sarpi

Chapter Four

Hegel's Conception of the State and Political Philosophy in a Post-Hegelian World[1]

The relationship between the state, the realm of authority and justice (*Recht*), and civil society, the sphere of transactions between individuals, in Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* has been criticised by liberals and Marxists alike.[2] Both take issue with his claim that a political community is defined by a number of common moral goals that are logically prior to those of its members and that the legitimacy of the state flows from upholding these, rather than the particular interests of individuals in society. Liberals argue that the state is simply a means to the fulfilment of our private projects. It is subordinate to society, therefore, merely providing a legal and institutional framework for the adjustment and reconciliation of the divergent pursuits of its different members. Marxists go further, denying the necessity of the state at all. They regard social conflict as the product of the class divisions of capitalism, to be eliminated in a communist society in which the state will wither away. Whilst liberals accuse Hegel of substituting the plurality and freedom of society for the imposed uniformity of a preconceived metaphysical entity, the 'supra-individual' state, Marxists believe he has simply 'reified' the present system of coercion and class exploitation.

Recent communitarian critics of both liberalism and Marxism have come to Hegel's defence. They maintain that neither the individualism of the former nor the class analysis of the latter are capable of explaining the myriad relationships that make up society and define the preferences and ideals of its members. However, they are equally uneasy with Hegel's metaphysical explanation of politics. They regard

2. This distinction is regarded as the 'antithesis of modern political thought' by R. N. Berki in his introduction to a collection of essays on *State and Society in Contemporary Europe*, Jack Hayward and R. Berki (eds), (Oxford, 1979). A similar claim is made by Z. A. Pelczynski in his very useful editorial introduction to *The State and Civil Society: Studies in Hegel's political philosophy* (Cambridge, 1984). My own interpretation is particularly indebted, even as a stimulus for disagreement, to the contributions of Pelczynski, Ilting, Plant and Walton to this volume.

the community as a product of its history and tradition and refrain from following Hegel and interpreting these processes as stages in the development of Spirit or the Idea, which gives to human affairs an inner meaning and rationality.[3]

Hegel's political philosophy, then, focuses on an important difference in three traditions of modern political thought – namely, three divergent ways of conceiving the relationship between the state and civil society, and hence of the role and nature of law, justice and morality (*Recht*) in regulating human affairs, which I propose to explore in this chapter. In the first section, I seek to defend Hegel from his liberal and Marxist critics. I maintain that this requires accepting not just his historical and sociological claims for the state but also the logical metaphysical status he accords to it. This, as I show in the second section, undermines the communitarians' interpretation of Hegel. Finally, in the third section I attempt to reinstate the Hegelian conception of rationality as a way of looking at contemporary political dilemmas in a post-Hegelian world, that is at a time when the historical community that gave rise to his theory no longer exists.

I

The traditional criticisms of Hegel turn on a double misunderstanding: either that the state is the reification of an empirical entity or that Hegel fits the facts into a preconceived logical scheme. These errors follow from the mistaken belief that Hegel's claim concerning the identity of the rational and real is historical rather than meta-historical. Hegel's concept of rationality derives from his *Logic* and is encapsulated in the reasoning behind the syllogism, whereby:

> Everything rational shows itself to be a threefold union or syllogism [of Universal, Particular and Individual], in that each of the members takes the place both of one of the extremes and the mediating middle.[4]

Even the most casual acquaintance with the *Philosophy of Right* (a glance at the table of contents of Knox's translation, for example) reveals this 'threefold mediation or syllogism' to be the organising principle of the work. Thus, the first syllogism – of Individual, Particular and Universal – is that to be found in Abstract Right. Here the individual will find the universal through seeking the fulfilment of the particular inclinations, needs and passions with which he or she was born, via the possession of property. Yet, even within this section, there is a threefold mediation of the Idea. The second mediation (adopting Hegel's abbreviation)

---

3. Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge, 1975) and Raymond Plant, *Hegel* (2nd edn, Oxford, 1983) both adopt this view. Their influential studies are discussed in section two. Other examples, which suggest that this is the new orthodoxy, are S. Avinieri, *Hegel's Theory of the Modern State* (Cambridge, 1972) and Bernard Cullen, *Hegel's Social and Political Thought* (Dublin, 1979).

4. Hegel: *Hegel's Logic: Being Part One of the Encyclopaedia of The Philosophical Sciences* (1830) trans. William Wallace, 3rd edn (Oxford, 1975) para. 187 zus, (amended translation R. B.). *See*, too, paras 6 and 181. My concentration on the 'Hegelian middle' derives from the analysis of this passage by Emil Fackenheim, *The Religious Dimension in Hegel's Thought* (Chicago, 1967), ch. 4.

U-I-P, deals with contract – that is, the regulation of individual wills once they come into contact with each other for the purposes of commerce and exchange. The final meditation P-U-I, having the Universal as its mid-point, deals with the morality of commerce and exchange and the notions of fraud and crime. Similarly, the third part of the *Philosophy of Right*, ethical life, is both the final mediation of the syllogism, P-U-I, whilst containing within it all three mediations. Thus the family is a unity founded on the immediacy of feeling, civil society a 'system of needs' based on the satisfaction of particular desires through the forces of production, whilst the State is the unity mediated by the Universal, the common good. Finally, within the State itself there are the three moments of the concept. As Hegel expressed it in the *Encyclopaedia*:

> the State is a system of three syllogisms: (i) The individual or person, through his particularity or physical or mental needs [...] is coupled with the Universal, i.e. with society, law, right, government. (ii) The will or action of Individuals is the intermediating force which procures for these needs satisfaction in society, law, etc [...] and which gives society, law etc [...], their fulfilment and actualization. (iii) But the Universal, i.e. the State, government, and law, is the permanent underlying mean in which the individuals and their satisfaction have and receive their fulfilled reality, intermediation and persistence. Each of the moments of the concept, as it is bought by intermediation to coalesce with the other extreme, is brought into union with itself and produces itself [...] It is only by this triad of syllogisms with the same terms that the whole is thoroughly understood in its organisation.[5]

The rationality of the State, therefore, resides in the constitution that embodies this threefold mediation in a *conscious* manner; in the moments of the legislature, which establishes the Universal from the perspective of particularity, the crown, which enacts the Universal as individuality, and the mediating middle, the executive, which subsumes particularity and individuality under the Universal. This rather formal working out of the logic of the State may seem at first glance to have fully justified the chief qualms of Hegel's detractors. But if Hegel is to be true to the logic of his theory of the State then the immanentist interpretation of his thought must be as untenable as its transcendent–metaphysical opposite. To favour either one of these would rule out the possibility of the two other elements necessary for the threefold mediation, which is the lynch-pin of Hegelian philosophy.[6] Two examples, of the transcendent or liberal and the immanentist or Marxist critiques respectively, will serve to show how the logic of Hegel's argument works against both these interpretations.

---

5. Hegel, *Logic: Encyclopedia*, para. 198.

6. My interpretation here follows that suggested by Fackenheim, *Religious Dimension*, pp. 220–2 and in, 'On the actuality of the rational and the rationality of the actual', *Review of Metaphysics* XXIII, 1969–70, pp. 690–8.