

i-Italy Gothic One

Stanton H. Burnett (October 07, 2007)



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This wonderful digital initiative, i-Italy, is, for those concerned with Italian politics, born under a cloud. By chance, it arrives at the same moment as the birth, in Italy, of the Partito democratico.

The debate rages as to what the PD will prove to be. Some have even suggested that the event will not prove to be of historic importance. They're wrong. What exactly is being launched is an excellent question, but when the Democrats of the Left (the twice-reformed Communists) closed their final congresso by singing "Over the Rainbow" rather than the Internationale, you knew that Italy's political furniture was being seriously re-arranged.

This regular column will not follow the events of (and before and after) October 14, will not recount and analyze the day-by-day infighting of power brokers, the electoral gamesmanship, the management of spoils, nor the doctrinal disputes. Well, maybe a little of that last one. Some of our time's best political analysts will be doing that elsewhere on this web site. We will be furnishing something else: the conceptual framework for understanding the events, the historic context, the relation to the written and unwritten rules of Italian politics, perhaps some of the color of the personalities and mysteries involved. What, we will ask, is dietro the dietrologia?

So what is happening on October 14? What's the proper conceptual framework?

Is it the next, perhaps the last, step of the transformation of Italian Communism, the final leg of the great trek toward democratic normalcy that began in Salerno in 1944?

Put another way, is it the final burial, the true liquidation, of the holy war between the churches of Catholicism and Marxism which defined post-war Italian politics and has left more than a few glowing embers among the ashes of the old conflict?

The creation of the PD has been seen as both an effort to save the Prodi government from its slim and unruly supporting coalition... and as an effort to hasten its end by producing a personality (Veltroni) who will loom so large that the pigmy-seeming Prodi cannot endure.

The salvation concept is linked to another prism through which the event may be seen: the fear and loathing produced in approximately half of politically-active Italians by the threat of the return of



Silvio Berlusconi.

And the Prodi-submergence theorem is itself linked to a whole set of historic doubts about strong individual leadership. Although, in a recent poll, a surprising number of Italians extended a cautious welcome to the idea of a “strong man,” they clearly did not represent the political class. Even Bettino Craxi’s closest collaborators were appalled when, while in Palazzo Chigi, he once suggested a series Rooseveltian “fireside chats.” A man on a balcony still looks like a man on a balcony, even in his favorite cardigan sweater. So, after the Unipol affair took D’Alema and Fassino out of the running for PD leadership, October must also be analyzed in terms of SuperWalter.

Or should we also see the ringing applause earned by Anna Finocchiaro at the final DS conclave as, in part, an expression of relief that this new stirring of the pot will sideline, for a while at least, the painful issue of quotas for women?

Without question the birth of the PD should be seen as opening a space to the left of the opposition coalition. When Fabio Mussi walked out of the PDS congress and into that space, he took a large chunk of Leftist sentiment with him. How will the working man view this son of a Tuscan steel worker, while seeing Bertinotti dress so much better than he used to?

The other part of the slide to center is an effort to lock in the reform wing of the Socialists. So the new game must also be seen in terms of DeMichelis and Bobo Craxi.

And the new party must, of course, be related to electoral reform. Since electoral reform has long since detached itself from the ongoing rhetoric about democracy and representation and has reduced itself to computer calculations of relative party benefit, the computers are humming as speak.

We could keep going, but you get the idea. If the PD founders on any rocks in the near future, it will be the turbulent passage between the serious Catholic politicians who are essential to its success and its intensely secular Leftists (and moderates). The fact that the spring foreign policy vote of confidence in the Senate turned, not on foreign policy, but on deals made with Andreotti and others over gay rights, shows that a Herculean (Veltronian?) effort of leadership will be required to keep these two centers of passion in the same political house.

So this one date, October 14, raises many of the issues of history, political practice, and culture on which we will try to shed light. Next time we’ll explain the column’s peculiar name and consider the very real question of whether an outsider can truly say anything sensible and interesting about Italian politics.

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His column, "Gothic", appears regularly in the "Bloggers" section of i-italy.



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