



Partecipazione e Conflitto
* *The Open Journal of Sociopolitical Studies*

<http://siba-ese.unisalento.it/index.php/paco>

ISSN: 1972-7623 (print version)

ISSN: 2035-6609 (electronic version)

PACO, Issue 9(3) 2016: 1067-1074

DOI: 10.1285/i20356609v9i3p1067

Published in November 15, 2016

Work licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non commercial-Share alike 3.0 Italian License

BOOK REVIEWS

Marco Damiani (2016), *La Sinistra radicale in Europa. Italia, Spagna, Francia, Germania [The Radical Left in Europe. Italy, Spain, France, Germany]*, Roma: Donzelli, P. 256.

Daniela Chironi

European University Institute

1. The State of the Field.

The end of the real socialism regimes between 1989 and 1991 did not lead to the demise of all Western Communist parties, but rather to a restructuring of the Communist political family which, in classical terms, has now disappeared. However, the outcomes of this process of restructuring remain largely unexplored. Literature on the changes within leftist parties since 1989 has indeed concentrated on the process of transformation of the larger Communist parties into Social Democratic parties; less attention has been devoted to the neo-Communist and “refounded” Communist parties (Bull 1995), considered a residual presence. Studies decreased further over the first decade of the twenty-first century, in line with the shrinking electoral power of the radical left. The most comprehensive works (Hudson 2000; Bosco 2000; Botella and Ramiro 2003) came out very early in the decade, leaving the subsequent adaptation processes neglected. More recently, attention to this group of parties has grown again (see in particular March 2011; Calossi 2016), especially in connection with the new

competitive scenarios opened by the global economic crisis. In recent years, studies on new emergent parties, in particular Syriza and Podemos, have flourished, but empirical analysis on other national cases is not only minimal, but often also dated. As a result, comparative knowledge —despite being fundamental in our field— is quite limited overall.

2. The Contents

“La sinistra radicale in Europa. Italia, Spagna, Francia, Germania” by Marco Damiani (2016) fills this gap in literature, providing an important diachronic overview of the evolution of the radical left parties in four Western European countries. The book is divided into parts: in the first, the author illustrates the analytical criteria on which the case studies were selected and introduces the scientific concepts —the (non) anti-system party and the anti-political-establishment party— which in his opinion might be adopted to categorise the parties being examined. He then moves to trace the history of each party, from its foundation to the present day, describing each key step that marked its transformation and adaptation processes. In the second part of the book, he provides a detailed analysis of some fundamental dimensions of the parties, i.e. their core values, memberships, electoral trends and their positions on the process of European integration.

In the conclusion, Damiani confirms his preliminary thesis: after the fall of the Soviet block, the parties of the radical left in Europe can no longer be defined anti-system parties, as they fully accept the rules of representative democracy, but they are anti-political-establishment parties, as they firmly oppose the current ruling elites, both centre-left and right, and the austerity policies that they support. Having left Communism behind them, nowadays their value orientation is guided by the principles of democratic socialism, aimed at the reduction of inequalities to be obtained through the redistribution of wealth and opportunities. Onto this basic structure are grafted elements of environmentalism, pacifism, feminism and gender culture. As far as the process of European integration is concerned, these parties are described as substantially Europeanist, despite advocating a more democratic Union and condemning austerity policies.

If a constant loss of members and votes is common to all the parties analysed (apart from Podemos, and to a lesser extent Die Linke), the organizational responses to this process are different: the plural-party; the front-party; the front; the movement party (Damiani feels this applies only to Podemos). Among these options, the front —i.e. a

loose, mainly electoral, form of coordination between independent parties— is said to be the weakest, as the recent difficulties encountered by the Fronte de Gauche and the electoral alliances formed in Italy by small, radical left-wing parties seem to prove.

The strategy of alliances pursued by the parties under examination has also been different, especially due to different systemic constraints and opportunities. In Italy and France, both bipolar systems with a chiefly majoritarian electoral law, the radical left and the centre left have collaborated more often: on the one hand, this strategy allowed the radical left to benefit from the carry-over effect generated by the party with the relative majority, but on the other, this tarnished its image as an alternative prospect. In Spain and Germany, however, both limited multiparty systems with an electoral law based on proportional representation, the independence of the radical left allowed it to drain votes from centre-left parties when the latter were losing approval. This dynamic became particularly visible in Spain during the economic crisis.

3. The Discussion on the definitions

The above outline shows that this is a significant publication, distinguished by its methodological accuracy and density of content, enhanced by its clarity. The author follows the categories of political science without resorting to the hyperspecialized language that, in my opinion, tends to distance our field more and more from public debate. In other words, this is a book that can certainly go outside university departments and be read by political activists and interested citizens too. Moreover, it makes a number of contributions to the scientific study of the contemporary left. Besides the merits I have pointed out above, party scholars will appreciate the author's effort to bring order to a field that is *per se* already extremely disordered at the empirical level, because it is fragmented into myriad small political formations. This field is equally disordered at the analytical level, given that—as Damiani notes at the beginning of the book (p. 23)— scientific literature has adopted a huge variety of labels to name the parties on the left of the major Social Democratic parties. Of this selection, Damiani chooses his own, by which he is convinced, which are “radical left” and “new left”, used interchangeably throughout to designate those parties that after the 1989 “although radically critical (that is, right down to the roots) of the choices made by the political classes in capitalist regimes, expressly declare their desire to bring about profound changes within the framework of the institutional system wherein they operate, basically accepting however the rules of the democratic game” (p. 14). These parties place themselves between the Social Democratic parties, which the author also calls

“reformist parties”, on their right, and the “extreme left parties”, which would still be anti-systemic. On the basis of this set of definitions, Damiani then proceeds to a systematization of the field of the “radical left”, including some parties and excluding others.

The problem of definition is a challenge that all scholars of leftist parties face nowadays, in a context of radical political transformations wherein the old families of parties have undergone dramatic changes. It is precisely from the identification of this common problem that we could (and, I believe, should) start a collective scientific discussion on the labels we use to categorize left-wing parties. For instance, after lengthy consideration, I find it hard to use the adjective “radical”, for several reasons: a) the prevalent connotation is negative, assigning it an evaluative content which risks being transposed to scientific texts; b) it is vague, making it unclear what this radicality refers to (loyalty to Marxist theory? A specific type of political practice? The policies that these parties put forward?); generally these parties do not define themselves as “radical” (apart from Syriza, an acronym that indeed means “Coalition of the radical left”), but rather as “left” (think of Die Linke-The Left, Izquierda Unida-United Left, Fronte de Gauche-Front of the Left, and so on). Similarly, I would avoid the automatic equation between the Socialist and Social Democratic parties and “reformism”, as well as that between parties still anchored to Trotskyite and Leninist traditions and “extremism”, because I think these labels carry a historic weight and meaning that have now been reduced or changed considerably.

All the parties included by Damiani within the family of the radical left could definitely be defined reformist, because, as the author himself acknowledges, they pursue the pragmatic aim of redistributing power and wealth through gradual reforms. In economics, their vision is guided by neo-Keynesianism and the refusal of neo-liberal recipes rather than by Marxist theory and radical anti-capitalism. On the other hand, as a party scholar, I wonder whether European Social Democracy can still be defined reformist in its nineteenth-century sense. In a historical phase that, as suggested by Kenneth Roberts (2015), we can consider a “critical neoliberal juncture”, those parties have indeed accelerated their transformation into electoral-professional parties (Panebianco 1982) prone to compromise with centre-right forces and the neoliberal agenda, thus abdicating their egalitarian mission. Finally, the parties Damiani defines “extremist” appear, rather, “immobilist” parties, not only basically irrelevant in their respective political contexts, but also conservative in their obstinate attachment to political options that are impracticable nowadays due to historical contingencies.

In summary, I am talking of an overall shift to the right of the whole political axis that should induce us as political scientists to rethink some categories that we have too

long assigned rather superficially. The political developments we have seen since the emergence of the economic crisis in which Europe is still embroiled should make us feel this need more keenly. New questions are indeed emerging in this context: what is the role of Social Democratic parties during the crisis? Why did the parties to their left suddenly come to the fore in some of the worst-affected countries, such as Spain and Greece, while in others, such as Italy, they were pushed to the fringes of the political game? Marco Damiani's book provides significant insights which help provide some initial, embryonic answers to these new and challenging questions.

4. What party model?

Further significant considerations concern the party model that the European left has embodied since the shock of the fall of real Socialism regimes. These considerations come from reading in sequence the history of the eight parties chosen for study in the first part of the book. This diachronic overview allows a general picture to emerge that the analysis of their individual cases would not reveal. Despite never holding a majority, these parties certainly played an important role in their respective political systems, by representing that portion of citizens who do not identify with any other available options, and also contributing to form local, regional, and in a few cases (such as Italy and France) even national governments. However, the history in sequence of four national cases and eight parties is the story of a declining parabola, a parabola characterized by a strong, even stubborn, will to survive. The dynamic common to all parties is that of a promising beginning, comprising fairly good electoral results and holding substantially steady at the organizational level, followed by a slow decline, with ups and downs, moments of recovery and crisis, but the basic trends are always the same.

Within this picture, Podemos, a party whose electoral capital hovers around 20% and whose membership is continually growing, proves an interesting exception. But it appears precisely that, a deviant case, born and developed in a completely new context. Founded in 2014 by a circle of young intellectuals, this party invested in continuity with the strategy, claims, and organizational models brought forward by the Indignados movement. It initially refused the traditional language and symbols of the left in order to appeal to a broader constituency. It also chose not to place itself on the left-right spectrum, but claimed to represent the interests of the "common people" against the attack of the political and economic oligarchy. Finally, it attempted to innovate on the traditional organizational model, by introducing cyber membership (Scarrow 2014),

online participatory decision-making and primary elections. Thanks to this series of innovations, in 2014, Podemos members numbered 251,998, whilst the membership of all the other parties fell well short of the 65,000 mark (p. 144). Moreover, between Podemos and the other case studies there is also a huge electoral gap: for instance, in the 2015 Spanish general election, Podemos took 20.7% of the vote, whereas in the last German general elections, held in 2013, Die Linke, the second most-voted party within the group, won only 8.6% (p. 164).

Marco Damiani does not directly investigate the factors that could explain the declining parabola of the parties which rose from the ashes of the old communist party family, nor does he explore the reasons behind the rapid rise of Podemos. Of course many structural factors, both economic and social, could be called upon to account for these separate paths, not least the differing impact of the economic crisis in different countries. However, the reader is left with the impression that in addition to the structural variables, there are others that regard more specifically the political culture and the party form.

The history in sequence of these parties seems to tell us that they found themselves struggling with the progressive erosion of political capital deriving from the main resource at their disposal: keeping their leftist identity. In this context, they have been more successful when they have embarked on a road to innovation, moving away from their original ideological and organizational structures to try out new models. Often, these models were influenced by the participative methods deployed and the issues raised by the social movements in their critical stance towards neoliberalism. This seems to be true for the Italian Communist Refoundation Party (PRC) during the early years of the new Millennium, when it tried to build a cooperative relationship with the powerful Global Justice Movement, and it is certainly true for Syriza and Podemos and their connections with the more recent anti-austerity movements. For this reason Damiani defines Podemos a “movement-party”, another concept of which I am sceptical, because it causes a blurring between political subjects that are distinct and act within the political system according to different logics. I think that the new type of left-wing party that Podemos embodies would be better labelled “hybrid party”, to stress their attempt to bring some organizational features and participatory methods typical of contemporary movements into the organization, which remains however a party organization.

Relations with the movements are also significant as far as coalition strategies are concerned. During the crisis, indeed, both Syriza and Podemos fiercely defended their distance from the main Social Democratic parties, pointing at them as corrupt and neoliberal cartel parties. Their rhetoric could induce one to define both parties anti-

political-establishment parties, as Damiani rightly says. Overall, the cultural, organizational and strategic peculiarities described above might have allowed these two parties to interpret the discontent resulting from the crisis, while in other countries the new left parties have been less appealing. Why? The author does not provide an explicit answer, but again his accurate analysis suggests something to the reader: they did not innovate enough. When reading the book, I am struck by the absence of some words that should be key issues in contemporary politics. The first word missing is “communication”. The only exception is again Podemos, of which it is said that “it diffused among the citizens thanks in part to the use of all forms of mass communication, new and old” (p. 71). Another fundamental absence regards women. We are talking of parties that stressed their desire to import elements coming from environmentalism, libertarian movements, movements for the advancement of civil rights, and last but not least, feminist movements and thought into the political culture of the traditional left. And yet, it is surprising that in the thirty years covered by Damiani there are no women in leading roles, with the exception of the long, and equally effective and innovative, Secretariat of Marie-George Buffet in the Parti Communiste Français (PCF), and the current two-headed structure of Die Linke, with a man and a woman as co-chairs. Nor are primary elections used for the selection of party leaders and candidates, again with the exception of Podemos and, surprisingly, the PCF.

Moving beyond the party form to consider the public discourse and the strategic alliances of this group of parties, opposition to the political establishment does not seem to be a common feature, or at least not more so than other party families. As mentioned above, I would use the label of anti-political-establishment party for Podemos and Syriza (in the latter case especially with reference to its opposition to the European oligarchy), as well as for the Italian Five Star Movement. However, I would be more wary of adopting it for the PRC for instance, and for all those parties that have ever formed electoral alliances, and even government alliances, with Social Democratic parties. This divergent interpretation probably derives from the different consideration that Damiani and I share as to the role of Social Democratic parties within the neoliberal critical juncture, a role that I would not hesitate to define functional to maintaining the status quo of finance capitalism (Gallino 2011) and consequently definitively distances these parties from the tradition of Nineteenth-century reformism.

It is my firm belief that the future of the new left parties will depend more on their ability to finally bring truly radical innovations to their party model, investing in political communication and the linkage with social movements, precisely as Podemos has done, rather than in an electoral deal with crisis-struck Social-democracy. And it is precisely at the conjunction between parties and social movements, between repre-

sentative democracy and “participation from below”, that we as political scientists should look to study the most interesting frontiers of political engagement.

References

- Bosco A. (2000), *Comunisti. Trasformazioni di partito in Italia, Spagna e Portogallo*, Bologna: Il Mulino
- Botella J., and L. Ramiro (2003), *The Crisis of West European Communist Parties and their Change Trajectories: Communists, Post-Communists, ex-Communists?*, in Botella J., and L. Ramiro (eds.), *The Crisis of Communism and Party Change. The Evolution of West European communist parties*, Barcelona: Institut de Sciences Politiques I Socials, pp. 237-257.
- Bull M. J. (1995), “The West European Communist Movement in the Late Twentieth Century”, *West European Politics*, 18(1): 78-97.
- Calossi E. (2016), *Anti-Austerity Left Parties in the European Union. Competition, coordination and Integration*, Pisa: Pisa University Press.
- Damiani M. (2016), *La sinistra radicale in Europa. Italia, Spagna, Francia, Germania*, Rome: Donzelli.
- Gallino L. (2011), *Finanzcapitalismo. La civiltà del denaro in crisi*, Torino: Einaudi.
- Hudson K. (2000), *European Communism since 1989: towards a new European Left?*, Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- March L. (2011), *Radical Left Parties in Europe*, London: Routledge.
- Panebianco A. (1982), *Modelli di partito. Organizzazione e potere nei partiti politici*, Bologna, Il Mulino.
- Roberts K. M. (2015), *Changing Course in Latin America: Party Systems in the Neoliberal Era*, New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Scarrow S. E. (2014), “Multi-Speed Membership Parties: Evidence and Implications”, Paper prepared for “Contemporary Meanings of Party Membership”, ECPR Joint Session of Workshops, Salamanca, April 10-15.