

# THE LEFT OUT OF HISTORY

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## ABSTRACT

Giorgio Cesarale's book *A Sinistra* takes for granted the fertility of the encounter between the 'bourgeois revolution' and anti-systemic movements from below. But it is an open question whether a radical 'stretching' of the notion of the 'Left' to encompass, if not to synthesise, subaltern studies, black radical tradition and anti-colonial indigenous political philosophies, as well as anti-capitalist feminisms, requires rewriting or abandoning the framework of political modernity, especially as crystallised in the short twentieth century.

## KEYWORDS

The Left, Black Radical Tradition, Anti-Capitalist Feminism, Subaltern Studies, Bourgeois Revolution.

Almost exactly forty years ago, Mario Tronti wrote an article in the journal *Laboratorio politico* with the title 'Sinistra' [*Left*].<sup>1</sup> In it, he confronted the crisis of the Left that emerged in the midst of the organic crisis of the 1970s – a crisis we know assumed a kaleidoscope of forms: economic, ideological, of legitimation, etc. He begins by setting out a genealogy: from the Left's birth in the French Assembly of 1789, to its encounter [*incontro*] with the workers' movement, which – he argues – shifts the Left from its progressive-liberal [*liberali progressive*] origins to its radical-democratic [*radicale e democratica*] high-point.<sup>2</sup> This article – and the debate that followed it<sup>3</sup> – is of particular interest, in retrospect, because it took place at a moment when the outlines of neoliberal ascendancy began to be deline-

1 It was published in *Laboratorio politico*, 3, May-June 1981.

2 'Sinistra', p. 133.

3 *Il concetto di sinistra*, Bompiani: Milano 1982.

ated in its political, economic, institutional and ideological forms, coming together in what has been termed a *nouvelle raison du monde*.<sup>4</sup>

The intervening time since this debate is, broadly speaking, the one in which the majority of the thinkers Giorgio Cesarale considers in *A Sinistra* produced the majority of their analyses. We might see this as a forty-year period bookended by crisis and transition. Equally we may see this as an *interregnum* in which crisis became – in the words of Dario Gentili – a mode of government.<sup>5</sup> More precisely, we might understand conjunctures of crisis as those where the orienting political *topos* Right/Left is unsettled, leaving all parties in a state of disorientation, bereft of the ‘cognitive maps’, the situational representations of one’s place within the political totality, without which strategic action is blind and powerless.<sup>6</sup> It is at this juncture that the option of abandoning the cardinal cartography of conflict polarised by the Right/Left dichotomy makes itself powerfully felt. Responding to Tronti, Massimo Cacciari argued against any attempt to reterritorialize politics once again on the Right/Left axis, now deemed no longer able to organise thought or practice:

The axial representation of the political system is constitutively unable to account for critical situations, for the production of discontinuities in processes, or to describe intrinsically *unstable* situations.<sup>7</sup>

That Cesarale felt the need to undertake this work of theoretical reconnoitring today may be regarded as a symptom of such an instability, written at a time when once again the *topoi* of the political map are undermined by processes that exceed them – seemingly ungovernable technological and economic shifts, the pathological erosion of the class and elite alliances that allowed liberal parliamentary to appear as the untranscendable horizon of the political, a globalisation that is no longer imaginable as a figure of progress and homogenisation, nature breaking into history as anthropogenic change triggers phenomena – from global warming to pandemic contagion – which test our very parameters for political action.

Perhaps this also explains why *A Sinistra* does not try to define the term Left. In some ways, it is less concerned with identifying what Left *is* – a task that still seemed both possible and urgent to Tronti in the early ‘80s – than with presenting, as the title suggests, thinking *on* or *from* the Left – thus leaving it to the reader to decide what unites them. For, while so many of the thinkers under review by Cesarale are preoccupied with both the necessity and the urgency of *orientation* in our present, with that work of strategic cartography that is the task of theory, they

4 Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, *La nouvelle raison du monde. Essai sur la société néolibérale* (Paris: La Découverte, 2009).

5 Dario Gentili, *Crisi come arte di governo* (Bologna: Quodlibet 2018).

6 On Jameson’s concept of cognitive mapping, see Cesarale, p. 118.

7 ‘La rappresentazione assiale del sistema politico è fisiologicamente inadatta a render conto delle situazioni critiche, del prodursi di discontinuità nei processi, di descrivere situazioni intrinsecamente instabili’ (Massimo Cacciari, ‘Sinisteritas’, in *Il concetto di sinistra*, p. 10).

are less concerned with, or capable of, infusing new meaning into the notion of the Left. Perhaps, this is because once the axis in which the specular pairing found its image breaks down, neither Left nor Right can find in their Other the rationale for their existence. What is it to think on the Left when the agonistic space that structured classical political modernity is dis-oriented, when it loses its bearings in a kind of cognitive disaster (etymologically an ill-starred event, but we could also say a loss of that starry map that guides action)? In Lukács's melancholy musing from the *Theory of the Novel*: 'Happy are those ages when the starry sky is the map of all possible paths – ages whose paths are illuminated by the light of the stars'.<sup>8</sup> The closest we come to a definition of what it is to think on the left in *A Sinistra* is probably when Cesarale tells us that what links the various thinkers discussed in the book is the 'non-necessity of order, its *contingency*, which impacts all contemporary power relations' [non *necessità dell'ordine*, *la sua* contingenza, *che investe tutte le odierne relazioni di potere*].<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, Tronti – in passing – had mentioned a similar characteristic: 'To say that you're on the left means saying that you're open to the new' [Dirsi *di sinistra* vuol dire *chiamarsi aperti al nuovo*]<sup>10</sup>, which he explains as being linked to the fact that the Right constitutes itself as the bulwark against change – as the defender of the 'established order' [*ordine costituito*].

How can we revisit the supposedly foundational nexus between the Left and the new, or the contingent, today? In what follows, we want, first, to explore how a modernist affinity of the Left with radical change has been unsettled by the disjunction of a certain Right from its historical association with conservatism or reaction. In a second moment, we want to think not so much about the way in which Left theory thinks contingency or novelty, but how the very emergence of a Left can itself be thought of as a kind of event or encounter in its own right, and how our current moment might see both the disaggregation of a certain Left and the incipient possibility of new Left formations, ones which may break the mould of that revolutionary encounter between radical liberal ideologues and plebeian labouring forces identified by Tronti and others.

If the acceptance of contingency and opening to the new is characteristic of the Left, it is hard, after the last four decades, to see the neoliberal Right as defender of the constituted order in any straightforward way. Was Thatcherism not a revolution? Not only economic and institutional, transforming the nature and function of the state to its very roots, but a cultural revolution, a transformation of subjectivities themselves and a displacement of the very space of political confrontation

8 G. Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel* (London: Merlin, 1978), p. 29.

9 Cesarale, p. xii.

10 Tronti, 'Sinistra', p. 134.

that allowed Left and Right to mutually define one another.<sup>11</sup> Many neoliberals – and public choice theorists who shared many of the former’s assumptions and aims<sup>12</sup> – view themselves as working ‘with the grain of human nature – with human self-interest’,<sup>13</sup> arguing that this can be advanced not by proposing classical Rightist policies, but by replacing inefficient alternating political policy choices with a more ‘rational’, calculable and hence putatively fair (non-partisan) set of representations by which society, state and economy can be ordered. Those embarking upon the ‘*pursuit of the disenchantment of politics by economics* [...] by management’<sup>14</sup> – or ‘politics without romance’<sup>15</sup> – argued that politics becomes dangerous if it enables the formation of collective will or decision-making. For typically politics – they contend – is driven by ideologically organised interests looking out for their own, indifferent to any ‘figment of social justice’<sup>16</sup> and where minorities are crushed by revanchist majorities. The effect of all of this was to shift the state away from being the arena where political struggle could be contended between organised, antagonistic parties representing different interests.<sup>17</sup>

For neoliberals and public choice theorists, the state should be restructured in accordance with the ‘economic theory of politics’, using ‘ordinary economic assumptions about the ‘utility-maximising behaviour of individuals’,<sup>18</sup> which the state regulates by the spread of markets or market-like mechanisms throughout the so-

11 Stuart Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left* (London: Verso, 1988), especially the essay ‘Gramsci and Us’: ‘Thatcherism’s project was to transform the state in order to restructure society: to decentre, to displace, the whole post-war formation; to reverse the political culture which had formed the basis of the political settlement – the historic compromise between labour and capital – which had been in place from 1945 onwards’ (p. 163).

12 Robert Chernomas and Ian Hudson, *The Profit Doctrine: Economists of the Neoliberal Era* (London: Pluto, 2017), esp. 78-105; Matthew Flinders and Jim Buller, “Depoliticisation: Principles, Tactics and Tools” (*British Politics*, 1, 2006); Noel Thompson, “Hollowing Out the State: Public Choice Theory and the Critique of Keynesian Social Democracy” (*Contemporary British History* 22, 3, 2008); Hui, Wang. 2006. ‘Depoliticized Politics, from East to West’. Trans. Christopher Connery. *New Left Review* II/41: 29-45.

13 See Daniel Stedman Jones, *Masters of the Universe: Hayek, Friedman, and the Birth of Neoliberal Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 130. James M. Buchanan goes as far as to call this ‘the wisdom of centuries’, “From Private Preference to Public Philosophy”, in *The Economics of Politics* (*IEA Readings*, 18, 1978), 17.

14 William Davies, *The Limits of Neoliberalism* (London: Sage, 2014), pp. 4 and 212.

15 James M. Buchanan, ‘Politics Without Romance’, in *The Logical Foundations of Constitutional Liberty* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1999), 45-59.

16 Friedrich Hayek, ‘Whither Democracy?’, in *New Studies in Philosophy, Politics, Economics, and the History of Ideas* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 157.

17 That this strategy of depoliticization was itself articulated in antagonistic, authoritarian and populist forms (as Thatcherism itself made plainly evident, from the jingoist boost of the Falklands War to the crushing of the Miner’s Strike) is of course testament to the way in which actually-existing neoliberalism always required supplementation by the ideologies and practices of the ‘old’ Right – Family and Flag above all.

18 James M. Buchanan, Buchanan, ‘From Private Preference to Public Philosophy’ in *The Economics of Politics* (London: IEA 197), pp. 89 and 17.

cial body. Independent central banks, auditing bodies with ‘key performance indicators’ the achievement of which (or not – more often than not, not) forces – or ‘nudges’ – public bodies (schools, hospitals and care provider, universities, etc.) to ‘up their game’ by competing for ‘customers’; they are impartial, ‘neutral’ arbiters because governed by ‘objective’ measures of efficiency to which all are subject and where success is measured ‘objectively’ through the pervasive power of proliferating ratings, auditing and bench-marking agencies.<sup>19</sup> This process of disenchantment of politics by economics allows for an agreed language and standard of measure to act as a conduit – to ‘channel the self-serving behaviour of participants’<sup>20</sup> – towards optimal goals for society. Representation is not here of different interests. Instead a ‘construction of a global language’ – of business and public policy – operates as ‘a measurement framework’ enabling a ‘blanket economic audit’.<sup>21</sup> Hence, conflict is not organised by contending parties, it is simply not-computed for there exists here no rival scale of ‘values’, of languages, of standpoints that might conflict. Neoliberal restructuring conjured away the postulated collective as imputed source of legitimacy by disaggregating it into units that are ultimately more abstract even than the symbolised people of the state or nation. What is this if not revolutionary? Does it not return us to Giacomo Leopardi’s critique – which in some ways echoes Hegel’s – of the French Revolution’s placing of Reason as ordering principle of the new times?

They did not see that the dominion of pure reason is one of despotism on a thousand counts, but I will summarize just one. Pure reason dispels illusion and fosters egoism. Egoism, shorn of illusions, extinguishes the nation’s spirit, virtue, etc., and divides nations by head count, that is, into as many parts as there are individuals. *Divide et impera*. Such division of the multitude, especially of this kind and resulting from this cause, is more the twin than the mother of servitude.<sup>22</sup>

In short, openness to the new, to ‘contingency’, to a revolution of order is not – is no longer – that which distinguishes the Left. Indeed, how often does the European Left find itself in a defensive posture, one often characterised in terms of resistance? Resist privatisation, resist the degradation of rights, defend the autonomy of institutions of learning from subordination to ‘social goals’ (framed, typically, by

19 Davies, *Limits* and the still useful M. Power, *The Audit Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

20 Buchanan, ‘From Private Preference to Public Philosophy’, 17.

21 Davies, *Limits*, p. 109.

22 ‘Non vedevano che l’impero della pura ragione è quello del dispotismo per mille capi, ma come sommariamente uno. La pura ragione dissipa le illusioni e conduce per mano l’egoismo. L’egoismo spoglio d’illusioni, estingue lo spirito nazionale, la virtù ec. e divide le nazioni per teste, vale a dire in tante parti quanto sono gl’individui. Divide et impera. Questa divisione della moltitudine, massimamente di questa natura, e prodotta da questa cagione, è piuttosto gemella che madre della servitù.’ G. Leopardi, *Zibaldone di pensieri* (Milan: Mondadori, 1983) p. 131.

business needs), and so on.<sup>23</sup> The claim that the Right only celebrates the sort of change in which ‘everything needs to change so everything can remain the same’, risks giving the Left false succour. Capitalism is quite happy with ‘the new’, for it has yet to find something it cannot commodify, and is always on the lookout for a new ‘fix’ (to borrow from David Harvey) for its limits and contradictions.

Perhaps awareness of the contingency of order is also no longer a sufficient demarcation point. And in any case, can the Right really be said to be unaware of contingency, does it not rather display a considerable sensitivity to it? It is most certainly present in thinkers of the Conservative Revolution – as manifested in the (oft quoted by Heidegger) line from Hölderlin’s ‘Patmos’: ‘But where danger is, grows / the saving power also’.<sup>24</sup> Hayek would surely not disagree – his attack on planning and endorsement of ‘catallaxy’ was as much against the conceit that the contingent should be captured and constrained, as it was about wanting to resist overbearing central government. So, if neither openness, novelty, contingency, or even just change demarcate the Left from the Right (although surely neither does the Left refuse these aspects), perhaps we’re on the wrong track? Maybe an opening can be found if instead of abandoning these terms, we problematise and rearticulate them – namely by thinking of novelty and contingency not in terms of the ideological desires, political aims or theoretical objects of the Left, but in terms of its origins (in a sense resonating with Benjamin’s *Ursprung* but also Marx’s *Ursprüngliche Akkumulation*)?

A first step might be to interrogate and perhaps bracket the genealogy, the tale of origins that not only tethers the political, and thus the Left, to a very precise – ultimately European – history, but also one that is remarkably historically narrow, soldering it, on the one hand, to the conflict with absolutism signalled by 1789, and, on the other, to the moment the State began to lose its ‘monopoly over politics’ [*monopolio della politica*]<sup>25</sup> in a narrow geographical location, central Europe – specifically Franco-Germany.<sup>26</sup> This genealogy is not ‘wrong’, but, as Tronti notes, it ties politics and hence the Left to its bourgeois filiation. No surprise then,

23 Pierre Bourdieu proposed that the contemporary political field was polarised between neoliberals subverting social (and welfare) relations in order to conserve capitalist relations of domination, on the one hand, and social forces which would be obliged to invent and construct a new social order in the guise of conserving post-war forms of solidarity and security. See in particular his article ‘Neo-liberalism, the Utopia (Becoming a Reality) of Unlimited Exploitation’, in *Acts of Resistance: Against the New Myths of Our Time* (London: Polity, 1998), pp. 94-105.

24 Most famously perhaps in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977) p. 28.

25 Tronti, ‘Sinistra’, p. 132.

26 Tronti is not specific about where or when this happened, speaking merely of ‘some decades ago’ (*qualche decennio fa*), but one can assume he is drawing here upon analyses of the early decades of the twentieth century – such as those of Carl Schmitt – that situate this temporally and geographically largely in Europe from the 1880s onwards, when the *potestas indirecta* such as mass parties, trade unions etc. came to fragment the unity of state *auctoritas*.

that as its plebeian energies are sapped or repressed (be it in the psychoanalytic or carceral sense), the Left drifts back into the purview of a now rudderless bourgeois subjectivity – witness the dead ends of sundry Third Ways.

What is perhaps necessary is an alternative, discontinuous genealogy, one that anchors the Left not to the history of watchwords and names, but to practices and subjects who have borne them, taking up again the long history of the marginalised, the excluded (women, the racialised, subalterns, heretics...), the property-less, the *'popolo minuto'*. Here 'Left' denotes those *outside* – or those that are most *within* as the grist upon which Power turns – or who are *within* only to the extent that they are structurally *against*. This is the ambivalent moment of the negative, whether dialectical or not – sometimes subsumed, but only as subordinated moments whose subordination must be repeatedly renewed, in an infinite programme of integration; sometimes expelled, but as expelled, always circling and threatening. And yet, one must beware of romanticism. Heidegger states that Nietzsche's breach with Wagner was inscribed from the start in the nature of the younger man's captivation by the older; whereas 'Wagner sought sheer upsurge of the Dionysian upon which one might ride, [...] Nietzsche sought to leash its force and give it form'.<sup>27</sup> The issue is not a celebration of the 'untamed' and those who are always without – otherwise that would lead us to the paradoxical conclusion that the Left can never assume power; that wherever a hierarchy exists, the Left cannot; wherever an exclusive group establishes itself, it is by its very nature already on the side of the enemy. The risk of this position is to establish the untamed as the virtuous, but ineffective – 'Good' by virtue of their futility.

Thus, while not gainsaying the critical importance of the encounter with the workers' movement, without which the global political history of the last 150 years is indecipherable, it is imperative to reinsert it into *longue durée*, and the Blochian non-synchronicity, of 'tradition of the oppressed'. If the transformative encounter between progressive bourgeois or radical-liberal ideology and the history- and value-making industrial masses represents the event of the Left's originary accumulation, so to speak, its modern synthesis, we also need to consider those Left formations which escape, deflect or undermine the '1789' paradigm. Against a virtuous or progressive dialectic between bourgeoisie and workers' movement are those 'Lefts', or those anti-systemic plebeian movements which would not necessarily identify as 'Left', which refused the 'encounter' with liberalism, parliamentarianism, natural law, the language of rights, or the state. From within the ranks of the workers' movement itself, one can think of Georges Sorel's steadfast anti-Jacobinism and radical suspicion of the nexus of parties, intellectuals and elites – an illiberalism capable of inspiring both Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence' and sundry reactionary *derives*. But, perhaps more pointedly, we can think of how a

<sup>27</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, vol. 1, *The Will to Power as Art* (New York: Harper Collins, 1979), p. 88.

‘mis-encounter’ or ‘non-recognition’ of the bourgeois filiation is a vital component of non-European, anti-capitalist radicalisms. An affirmation of the mis-encounter or missed encounter<sup>28</sup> between the ‘bourgeois revolution’ and anti-systemic movements from below is at the core, among others, of subaltern studies,<sup>29</sup> the black radical tradition<sup>30</sup> and anti-colonial indigenous political philosophies,<sup>31</sup> as well as of anti-capitalist feminisms.<sup>32</sup> It is an open question whether a radical ‘stretching’ (to invoke Fanon’s remark on Marxism) of the notion of the ‘Left’ to encompass, if not to synthesise, these insurgent currents, requires rewriting or abandoning the framework of political modernity, especially as crystallised in the short twentieth century.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, when it comes to these questions we may need to dwell in antinomy, recognising, for instance, *both* that the Haitian Revolution was the intense apex of a transnational revolutionary phase, the ‘coming-true’ of the principles of the French revolution *and* that ‘it never lived up to the schema by which revolution functions as a modernizing force catalysing technological advancement and the emergence of new, more sophisticated and efficient modes of capital accumulation’, that it was not a progressive act of emancipatory state-making but the emergence of a ‘profoundly entrenched counterinstitutional society’, against state and capital.<sup>34</sup> What is evident is that thinking the ‘Left’ beyond the supposedly singular event, the originary political accumulation, of the meeting of the radical bourgeoisie (or even of ‘philosophy’, as in the young Marx) and the workers’ movement, requires being open to the contingency, the novelty of the Left’s own formations. This is especially pertinent in our own moment of *polarisation without orientation*, when the often spectacular verbal or ideological antagonism that pervades an intensely mediated superstructure is not accompanied by a determination of political subjects with the collective consistency or cognitive coherence of

28 We are playing here with the notion of a *desencuentro* (between Latin American political history and Marxism) at the heart of José Arico’s *Marx and Latin America*, trans. David Broder (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

29 Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).

30 Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Movements in America* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

31 Audra Simpson, ‘The ruse of consent and the anatomy of “refusal”: cases from indigenous North America and Australia,’ *Postcolonial Studies* 20.1 (2017): 18-33; Glen Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

32 Brenna Bhandar and Rafeef Ziadah, *Revolutionary Feminisms: Conversations on Collective Action and Radical Thought* (London: Verso, 2020).

33 For an important effort to articulate an alternative political modernity open to the spectrum of subaltern movements, see Massimiliano Tomba, *Insurgent Universality: An Alternative Legacy of Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

34 Johnhenry Gonzalez, *Maroon Nation: A History of Revolutionary Haiti* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), pp. 29-31. See also the review of Gonzalez’s book, along Julius S. Scott’s *The Common Wind*, in David A. Bell, ‘The Contagious Revolution’, *The New York Review of Books*, 19 December 2019.

classical Lefts and Rights. Largely, anti-communist without communism face off against social-democrats bereft of social-democracy's historical conditions of possibility. In the meanwhile, and not least because of the lethal consequences of the 'metabolic rift' between capitalism and nature, the philosophies of historical progress that made the '1789' encounter possible lie in tatters. Contrary to Stalin's entreaty at the 19<sup>th</sup> Congress of the PCUS in 1952, the last he presided, for the communist movement to pick up the banners of the bourgeoisie, perhaps they are best left where we found them. Taking some distance from the icons and watchwords of the twentieth century, especially from the social-democracy which is the real 'spectre' haunting our present (Green New Deal, etc.), might allow space for new encounters between political and organisational forms (which is, in a sense, to say *theory*) and collective movements and forms of life (which is, in a sense, to say *practice*).