

The Death of Social Democracy: The Case of the Italian Democratic Party

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Abstract: This article tries to explain why Italy is the only Western European country where a social democratic party no longer exists. It will be argued that the historical weakness of the socialist tradition, due to the peculiarities of the Italian party system, prevented the emergence of a strong social-democratic alternative to the Christian-democratic government during the First Republic. Moreover, the attempt to create a modern socialist party after the collapse of the PCI and PSI completely failed. So far the new Democratic Party has not been able to broaden the support for the centre left and still lacks a defined identity. This perhaps demonstrates that it is still difficult to build a valid centre-left alternative to social democracy in Europe. The Italian case, however, cannot just be dismissed as an anomaly. In fact, it well represents a general crisis of the European moderate left. The debate that is taking place in France shows that other traditionally weak socialist parties might follow the Italian example.

Keywords: Social democracy, party system, catch-all party, cartel party, Democratic Party, Italian anomaly.

Introduction

With the birth of the Democratic Party (Partito Democratico, PD), social democracy has officially ceased to exist in Italy. This may be regarded as an anomaly, since in all the other Western European countries there still exist important political forces belonging to the socialist family. Yet this anomaly is more apparent than real. As the Italian socialist tradition has been historically weak, Italy has experienced in advance what other established democracies might experience in the near future. In the rest of Europe social democracy has for a long time been the largest political force on the left. With few exceptions, it has always represented the strongest alternative to the conservative and Christian-democratic centre right. Today, despite having renounced most of its traditional values (Callinicos, 2003), in many European countries social democracy remains a political label symbolising a prestigious tradition still attracting millions of votes. To be sure, the disastrous results of the last European elections have confirmed that, generally, social democracy is experiencing a deep identity crisis

which could lead to its final collapse (Lavelle, 2008). Yet in the rest of Europe the agony of democratic socialism will probably last longer than in Italy. Indeed, the Italian Socialist Party (Partito Socialista Italiano, PSI) never became a large reformist party, able to compete with the centre, and it literally collapsed at the beginning of the 1990s. Even the subsequent attempt to re-build a socialist force on the ashes of the Italian Communist Party (Partito Comunista Italiano, PCI) would prove a failure.

Many scholars have highlighted that European social-democratic parties are gradually evolving from 'catch-all parties' to 'cartel parties', that is, parties totally controlled by professional politicians in which the differences between members, sympathisers and voters have almost completely disappeared (Bellucci et al., 2000). Whereas the catch-all party was still a strong and well-rooted political organisation, the cartel party is just an electoral committee, an instrument to win elections. Its 'elites at different levels are autonomous of each other, forming a so-called "stratarchy"'. There is neither hierarchical top-down control nor democratic bottom-up control' (Donovan, 1998: 284). The party programme does not mirror any long-term political project but, like a marketing plan, it is built on opinion polls and surveys. More worryingly, a cartel party 'no longer acts for the public good but rather for private interests' (Pelizzo, 2008: 13-14).

In Italy this process has resulted in the creation of the PD which has openly broken with the socialist tradition. Yet this transformation has not led to the construction of an effective alternative to the right based on a new identity. The disastrous experience of the PD perhaps demonstrates that a great part of the political appeal of the moderate left is still based on its traditional identity and its connections with the labour movement. This partially explains why European 'reformist' leaders are generally reluctant officially to stop defining themselves as members of the social-democratic family. Their catch-all strategy is still largely based on the persistent salience of the left-right cleavage which 'has greatly helped the socialist parties to retain the electoral support of their traditional constituencies ... while at the same time moving toward the centre' (Puhle, 2001: 284). The PD which, as conceived by its founders, should have paved the way for a post ideological, post social-democratic and 'Americanised' people's party in Europe is now regarded as a sad prophecy of what could eventually occur in other European countries.

In France, for example, a similar process is taking place. This is not surprising since the French party system shares some of the characteristics of the one in Italy, despite different voting systems and different constitutional frameworks. In both countries, class de-alignment has always been a marked phenomenon and socialist parties have never clearly performed the role of 'parties of the working class'. Moreover, in the past, they had to compete with strong and organised communist parties.

Eventually the French Socialist Party (Parti Socialiste, PS), under François Mitterrand's charismatic leadership, was able to impose its hegemony over the left. Yet today the PS remains organisationally very weak and is sometimes said to exemplify a *social-démocratie des élus*, since it has never been a mass party and relies heavily on local *notables* (Clift, 2005).

Today the French socialists are suffering a deep crisis. For the first time since 1981, the PS has been defeated in two consecutive parliamentary elections despite the hopes raised by the Jospin government between 1997 and 2002. The PS collapse in the last European elections further accentuated its internal divisions. In this dramatic context, an important part of the PS is calling for an alliance with the centrist MoDem led by André Bayrou and, since the European elections, with the rather moderate ecologist party led by Daniel Cohn-Bendit. Indeed, in an editorial entitled 'La résistible ascension de Nicolas Sarkozy', Laurent Joffrin, lead political editorialist for the daily newspaper, *Libération*, recently stated that the *Gauche Plurielle* can no longer provide a reliable majority, since 'there is no more PCF and the PS is weaker'. The solution would therefore be an alliance with the centre at the next presidential election which could be the first step towards a broad 'post-Sarkozy coalition' (Joffrin, 2009). It is striking that a similar debate took place in Italy almost fifteen years ago, when the failure of the left-wing Progressisti coalition (a sort of Italian Union de la Gauche) prompted the Democratic Party of the Left (Partito Democratico della Sinistra, PDS), heir of the socialist tradition, to establish an alliance with the Christian-democratic People's Party (Partito Popolare Italiano, PPI). This was the first step in a long-term process which would eventually lead to the creation of the PD.

Moreover, France will probably be the second country in Europe (after Italy) where open primary elections are held, as they are likely to be adopted to choose the next centre-left candidate for the presidential election. In a recent article appearing in *Le Monde*, the *première secrétaire* Martine Aubry (2009) called for organisational reform of the PS to promote new forms of political participation. The candidacy of Ségolène Royal in the 2007 presidential election indeed represented a first attempt to establish a direct relationship between leader and electorate which would transcend the mediation of the party apparatus.

The French events demonstrate that, in the near future, the Italian experience could be repeated in other European countries where the left is increasingly weak and unable to build solid majorities. From a comparative perspective, a deeper analysis of the Italian case can therefore help us to understand better the transformation (and crisis) of the social-democratic left in the rest of Europe.

In this article, I will analyse the dynamic of left-wing politics in Italy with particular attention to the new developments occurring on the

moderate left. I will try to detect patterns in the transition process which led to the formation of the PD. I will describe its new organisation, its membership and the social composition of its electorate. I will also analyse the geographic distribution of its electoral support which, interestingly, remains very similar to that of the PCI.

Generally, the Italian left now seems subject to centrifugal tendencies. On the one hand, the PD has undoubtedly shifted towards the centre and has tried to present itself as a large and non-ideological reformist coalition similar to the American Democratic Party. Yet it is still in search of a well-defined identity and its internal factions appear increasingly divided. On the other hand, the far left, after failing to create a new left-wing plural party, has undergone a 'restructuring process' and is now divided into two well-defined parts with almost the same (extremely low) level of electoral support. Finally, the emergence of a left-wing populist party, Italy of Values (Italia dei Valori, IdV) is increasingly destabilising the PD and threatening its primacy on the centre-left. This shows that populism is able to exploit the organisational weakness of the new cartel parties which have lost their control of the electorate (Jones, 2007).

The Italian exception

Although social democratic parties of southern and northern Europe differed significantly from each other, in the 1980s they started to converge towards a similar 'catch-all party' model (Phule, 2001). Indeed, in all the western democracies, social democracy controlled a large share of the vote (ranging from 30 to 50 per cent) and was by far the largest political force of the left. In this context, Italy represented a rather significant exception. From 1948 until its collapse in the early 1990s, the PSI was unable to impose its hegemony over the left and had to coexist with the strongest communist party in the West. In the 1976 elections the PSI obtained only 9.7 per cent of the vote whereas the PCI scored more than 34 per cent. This situation slightly changed in the 1980s when Bettino Craxi's aggressive leadership transformed the PSI into a central actor in Italian politics. 'Craxi wanted to cultivate the impression among the middle-class electorate that he could make modern Italy governable through strong executive control' (Maguire, 1993: 87). Yet electoral support for the PSI never went beyond 14 per cent of the vote. When Craxi became Prime Minister he was in a very different position from that of his socialist colleagues Felipe Gonzalez and Andreas Papandreou, since his coalition was composed of five parties among which the Christian Democrats (Democrazia Cristiana, DC), and not the PSI, was the largest one.

Hence the Italian socialist tradition appears historically weaker than that of all the other European countries. This was partially due to the 'polarised pluralism' (Sartori, 2005) which characterised the Italian party

political system for more than forty years. In this context, one party or a coalition of parties constantly occupies the centre of the system to prevent strong anti-system parties from gaining the majority of seats in Parliament. The Socialist Party, after having broken its alliance with the Communists in the 1950s, became part of the political bloc built to confine the PCI to a permanent opposition role. In Italy there was no real alternation between left- and right-wing parties and this situation produced what has been called 'blocked democracy'. The DC and the PCI were the two largest parties, together controlling almost 70 per cent of the vote, but the latter was considered an anti-system party. It followed that strong polarisation and centrifugal, rather than centripetal, drives were encouraged (Sartori 2005: 117-120). Moreover, the political alternatives that the voters faced were, more than in other western European countries, 'significantly constrained by the political realities of the Cold War' (Sani and Segatti, 2001: 163). The PSI was thus squeezed out by the bipolar DC-PCI relationship which reflected the international confrontation between the US and the USSR.

To be sure, Italy was much more industrialised than Spain, Portugal and Greece. In northern Italy there was a strong working class which, however, did not vote massively for the left. In fact, Italy was one of the few European industrialised countries in which the left as a whole was a minority among industrial workers. Only in the 1970s did it significantly increase its votes in the working-class constituencies, and in the 1972 elections the PCI and PSI together obtained, for the first time, more than 50 per cent of the vote among blue-collar workers. Nevertheless, this was a 'trendless fluctuation' and class dealignment remained a constant characteristic of the Italian electorate. The 'K factor', which implied that the PCI was not a party with governmental legitimacy, strongly influenced the electoral behaviour of the working class (Leonardi, 2006).

Although in the 1980s the PCI underwent a process of 'social democratisation' and retained an important share of the electorate, comparable to that of other social-democratic parties, it still lacked most of their characteristics. Of course, it had strong connections with CGIL, the largest trade-union confederation, but, as previously suggested, it did not represent the majority of the working class. Experience in local administration and attempts to reform however, improved its image as a party with a governmental vocation.

Yet its relationship with the USSR and its internal organisation, based on the principle of 'democratic centralism', prevented it from being completely reformed. Indeed, the internal organisation of a party can represent an obstacle to its transformation and adaptation to changing external conditions. Parties are not only victims of their social and economic environments but they should also be regarded as 'independent

variables' (Clift, 2005: 83). As Sheri Berman (1997: 102-3) points out, in order to understand why certain parties are able to respond better than others to economic and social changes, 'one has to look carefully inside the parties themselves, to their institutional structures, ideological traditions and leadership'. Only after the collapse of the USSR did the PCI feel obliged to change its name and logo and to launch a radical, albeit ambiguous, political and programmatic transformation (Pasquino, 2003: 202). 'However flexible in other respects, the PCI remained Stalinist in both its internal structures and its external ties to the Soviet state' (Anderson, 2009). Moreover, in the 1980s the PCI was no longer able to detect decisive changes occurring in the workplace. Its official idealist interpretation of Gramsci's philosophy 'disabled it from grasping the material drives of the market and media that transformed leisure in Italy'. 'The result was a gap so large between educated and popular sensibilities that the country was left more or less defenceless against the cultural counter-revolution of Berlusconi's television empire' (Anderson, 2009).

Furthermore, the uncertainties and ambiguities in the PCI's transition were accompanied by the dramatic collapse of the PSI, which had become Craxi's personal party and died when its leader fell into disgrace. All these events prevented the emergence of a strong social-democratic party in Italy. The PDS, born from the ashes of the PCI, initially tried to build a movement similar to other European socialist parties, but it was too late. Social democracy in Italy did not have the political legitimacy and the appeal that it enjoyed in other European countries. Also, it became increasingly evident 'that the disappearance of the official Communist Party had by no means eliminated widespread and powerful anti-communist sentiments' (Pasquino, 2003: 202). The PDS transformation was therefore perceived as half-hearted. Communism remained a major obstacle on the PDS's path to legitimacy and power. This prompted its leaders to establish a new alliance with an important part of the post-Christian democratic centre, thus undertaking a process of political reform even more radical and 'transgressive' than that implemented by Tony Blair (Moschonas, 2002: 164).

Some consider the creation of the PD as the final step of a 15-year process to dilute the party's communist past and complete the process of legitimisation which had begun with the birth of the PDS (Bordandini et al., 2008: 308). For others the PD just represents the delayed fulfilment of the 'historic compromise' between the PCI and the DC theorised by the Communist leader Enrico Berlinguer in the 1970s. That was indeed the first attempt to create a democratic coalition based on the two most significant Italian political subcultures. Not surprisingly, the historic compromise excluded the socialist tradition.

To be sure, the historical weakness of democratic socialism accounts for the fact that Italy is the first European country where social democracy

has formally ceased to exist. Here socialism has not developed in the same way as it did in the rest of Europe. Its end should therefore be regarded as an aborted experiment rather than a real death. In the 1980s Bettino Craxi failed to impose a socialist hegemony over the left. Instead, his leadership destroyed what remained of the socialist tradition, to the point that for many Italians the word socialism is now synonymous with corruption, clientelism and misgovernment. In the 1990s, the former-Communist leaders were unable to build a modern socialist party and a plural left coalition. They realised very soon that they needed to ally with the centre, rather than with the extreme left, if they wanted to govern.

The transition to the PD

At the beginning of the 1990s, the conditions for the creation of a large Italian social-democratic party seemed more favourable. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the PCI lost its ideological bearings and began to look for a reference point within European social democracy. In fact, 'the PCI's conscious shift towards an ideological affinity with social democracy came after Berlinguer's death' (Abse, 2001: 61) but it was not officially recognised. In 1989 an important member of the German Social Democrats, Peter Glotz, stated that 'the PCI can be considered as a truly social-democratic party. It only needs to openly and officially define itself as social-democratic' (in Barbieri, 1989: 4). The major external obstacle to any consistent and whole-hearted 'social democratisation' of the PCI in the 1984-1989 period was the intense hostility of Craxi's Socialist Party, 'a hostility which was reciprocated ... by the majority of the PCI members, with the exception of some miglioristi on the extreme right of the party' (Abse, 2001: 64). Indeed only the latter faction called for a merger with the PSI to create a large and modern social-democratic party. On the other hand, PCI leader, Achille Occhetto, had a less coherent strategy since he sought to reconcile the different positions emerging in the party debate. The ambiguity in the transformation process of the PCI-PDS partially accounts for its electoral collapse in the 1992 elections (from 26 to 16 per cent). On this occasion its primacy on the left was dangerously threatened by the PSI (14 per cent).

Of course, Craxi's aggressive leadership constituted an obstacle to the construction of an alliance between the PSI and the PCI-PDS. His ambition was to overtake the PCI electorally in the way François Mitterrand's PS had overtaken the French Communist Party (Parti Communiste Français, PCF). However, whereas Mitterrand was able to weaken the PCF by allying with it, Craxi thought that the PCI's marginalisation 'was to be achieved by the PSI's continuous presence in government alongside the DC and no other alliance was contemplated until the PCI had become the junior partner' (Abse, 2001: 64). He therefore constantly denied any partial 'social

democratisation' of the PCI, even after its eighteenth congress, when Occhetto officially started the transformation of the PCI into the PDS.

In 1989 the PCI underwent 'a genetic mutation', said the old leader of the 'orthodox' faction, Armando Cossutta. He also prophetically stated that 'some of our leaders maintain that our party model must be like that of the American Democratic Party' (Fouskas, 1998: 26-27). This prediction did not sound completely realistic at the beginning of the 1990s when Occhetto declared that the PCI wanted to be a decisive component of the European Left. Yet, Emanuele Macaluso emphasises that the decision to call the new party 'Democratic Party of the Left' without any reference to European socialism clearly indicates Occhetto's desire to go 'beyond socialism'. The party leadership was secretly convinced that socialism would eventually die with communism and that, therefore, it was necessary to find new solutions to overcome the crisis of the left (Macaluso, 2007: 16-17).

The PCI-PDS's economic policies became essentially Keynesian, recognising the importance of the market economy but, at the same time, placing emphasis on the positive role of state intervention. Occhetto also paid attention to the new post-materialist movements of the left such as environmentalism and feminism. In sum, the PCI was hurriedly undertaking a transformation which all the other European social-democratic parties had undergone two or three decades before. Nevertheless, Keynesianism had already been dismissed in the 1980s by the other socialist parties. Indeed, the construction of the new single European market, backed by many socialist leaders, was inspired by neo-liberal and monetarist principles which were more difficult to reconcile with classical Keynesian goals. This was soon realised by the PDS which, during the 1994 election campaign, 'strove to present itself as the firmest champion of financial orthodoxy' (Abse, 2001: 68).

In 1994 Occhetto's party found itself in a rather favourable position. As a matter of fact, all the other parties of the First Republic had disappeared after *Tangentopoli*, an investigation which uncovered a huge network of political corruption. The only opposition to the left was then represented by the Northern League and the Italian Social Movement (Movimento Sociale Italiano, MSI) which lacked nation-wide support. The PDS, which had been accepted as a member of the Socialist International in 1993, no longer had to compete with the PSI and thus became the only representative of the reformist tradition in Italy. However, despite all these positive factors, the PDS suffered a disastrous defeat in the 1994 general elections when the media tycoon Silvio Berlusconi was able to build a strong and electorally competitive right-wing coalition. This defeat put an end to the coalition of Progressisti (Progressives), a large front composed of moderate and radical left parties, including Communist Refoundation (Rifondazione Comunista, RC) which had split with the PDS only three years before. Indeed, many differences between the PDS and RC had

already emerged in the previous years, particularly regarding economic policies and European integration. For example, the PDS strongly supported the Maastricht treaty, whereas RC developed a radically anti-liberal and anti-Maastricht platform (Charalambous, 2008: 1-8). It was in fact very difficult to reconcile these positions and many voters probably perceived the coalition, *à la gauche plurielle*, as too weak and fragmented to govern effectively.

Over the period 1994-1996 two left-wing currents were therefore taking shape from the ashes of the old PCI: a reformist one, embodied by the PDS, and a radical one, represented by RC. Their divergence further confirmed the centrifugal tendencies of the Italian left. As Lapo Salucci points out, 'the history of Italy's political left is fraught with divisions and scissions' (Salucci, 2008: 1).

The results of the 1994 election were indeed shattering for the PDS but confirmed that this party, obtaining 20 per cent of the vote, was more important than ever since it represented around 80 per cent of all left-of-centre voting in the country (Newell and Bull, 1997: 100). Yet the PDS was insufficiently large by itself to act as an alternative to the centre right and was immediately faced with the dilemma of either continuing to be part of a left-wing alliance or trying to build a new alliance with what remained of the Christian-democratic centre.¹ In addition, the transformation of the PCI 'rather than leading to an innovative experiment in party organisation which was genuinely open to new members, had resulted in the PDS being effectively captured by the old apparatchiks' (Newell and Bull, 1997: 100). This prevented it from widening its electoral support and becoming a large and autonomous social-democratic party.

After the 1994 defeat Occhetto resigned and Massimo D'Alema became the new leader. He immediately recognised that the principal cause of the Progressives' defeat was the failure to extend the alliance to the centre. The PDS therefore started a dialogue with the PPI which led to the first electoral alliance in the 1994 local elections. The success of this experiment prompted D'Alema to state, in November 1994, that 'the PDS and the PPI are ready to govern this country together' (Rosso, 1994: 7).

D'Alema also started flirting with the xenophobic and separatist Northern League. In a famous interview, he declared that 'the Northern League [was] a *costola* of the left', that is, it was strongly connected to the left, 'since it [was] the largest working-class party in Northern Italy' (*la Repubblica*, 1 November 1995, p. 13). The League not only received the support of blue-collar workers but was also an 'inter-class' party representing the interests of small entrepreneurs in the North. In D'Alema's view, a strategic alliance with the League would help the PDS to strengthen its position in the most economically dynamic areas of the country, thus

attracting the support of those social strata not traditionally aligned with the left.

However, despite his political eclecticism and unscrupulousness, D'Alema never questioned the importance of building a strong social-democratic party. As a matter of fact, he 'was seen as someone who wanted to turn the PDS into an organisation that resembled the social-democratic parties of Western Europe' (Abse, 2001: 68). He called for an alliance between the left and the centre, but always rejected the idea of an all-embracing Democratic Party similar to the American one. It is therefore unsurprising that within the PDS, his fiercest opponent was Walter Veltroni, the future leader of the new Democratic Party.

In 1995 the Ulivo (Olive Tree) alliance, which comprised the PDS, the PPI and the Greens was officially launched.² Its success in 1996, however, did not mitigate the differences among the various PDS factions. The *Ulivisti*, led by Veltroni, believed that the future of the PDS depended 'entirely upon their ability to remain within the Olive-Tree coalition and to make it better organised and capable of reaching out to voters who would never otherwise vote for "former Communists"' (Pasquino, 2003: 211). In their view, the Olive Tree could represent the first step towards the creation of a united reformist party. On the other hand, the 'traditionalists', allied with D'Alema, thought that the Olive Tree should remain a plural centre-left alliance in which a greater left-wing party would constructively engage with the centre, thus strengthening the whole coalition. Moreover, the internal left believed that RC should remain the central political interlocutor of the PDS and tried to oppose the gradual shift of the party to the centre. So the failure to build a strong social-democratic party was also due to persistent intra-party conflict which became more explicit after 2000. D'Alema's strategy was opposed by both the *Ulivisti* and the internal left. This obviously disoriented important sectors of the electorate and membership.

Moreover, despite being the strongest party of the Ulivo, the PDS was unable clearly to become the leading party in the coalition. Romano Prodi, who won the elections in 1996, was a former Christian-democratic technocrat and was not a member of either the PDS or the PPI. This indeed represents an anomaly among modern democracies where the leader of the coalition's largest party 'naturally' becomes the leader of the coalition itself. The communist background of the PDS and the will to attract more moderate voters probably played an important part in preventing this party from taking the leadership of the Ulivo. After the fall of Prodi in 1998, D'Alema became Prime Minister but he managed to stay in office for only two years. His successors were Amato, a former member of the PSI, and the centrist Rutelli. So, whereas the strongest political formation of the centre right, Berlusconi's Forza Italia, clearly played the role of linchpin among

different parties, the PDS could not be considered a real coalition-maker (Pasquino, 2003: 209-10).

Meanwhile, despite his attachment to a more European social-democratic tradition, D'Alema openly favoured a further move of the party towards neo-liberalism. At the 1997 Congress, both Veltroni and D'Alema supported a motion stating that 'we must be brave enough to think in terms of fewer guarantees and protections, and more culture, work and expansion of individual opportunities... The passage from a welfare of guarantees to a welfare of opportunities is the way to win the support of those ... who feel excluded from the old system of guarantees' (Hellmann, 1997: 97).

In 1998, D'Alema made the last attempt to widen the base of the PDS and to accelerate the party's 'social democratisation', launching what was then considered the 'Epinay' of the Italian Left, the so-called *Cosa Due*³ ('Second Thing'). At a conference organised in Florence, the PDS decided to merge with other small political forces.⁴ This merger produced a federal-like party, the co-option of the old leaderships into an enlarged executive, and the renaming of the Democratic Party of the Left as the Democrats of the Left (DS) (Bull, 2003: 60). However, 'the transformation into the Democrats of the Left ... was little more than a bureaucratic exercise at the elite level... The main organisational attributes and practices of the old party ... remained fundamentally intact' (Bull, 2003: 65).

In the following years, what Panebianco defines as the 'dominant coalition' of the party, based on an agreement between Veltroni and D'Alema, became less cohesive, as manifested in the 2001 Pesaro Congress when, for the first time, three candidates ran for the leadership. Therefore 'factionalisation' started to affect the organisation of the party and the dynamics of the secretary's election (Giannetti and Mulè, 2006: 467). Moreover, in 2000 the rather centralised structure of the party was partially replaced with a more federal one. In fact, the statutes approved during the congress in Turin (2000) and Pesaro (2005) sought to create a 'federal' party, with regional units (*Unioni Regionali*) as the basic organisational level.⁵

However, despite all the attempts further to reform the party, the DS were unable to broaden their electoral support and the trend in membership enrolment continued dramatically to decline. The results of the 2001 general election (16.6 per cent) made it clear that, after ten years, the DS was still very far from being a strong European social-democratic party. This defeat was particularly due to the poor governmental performance of the party. Indeed, once in power, the Ulivo coalition was committed more than anything else to fulfilling the financial goals imposed by Brussels in order to join the Euro-zone in the first round. Thus, instead of implementing expansive and progressive policies, the DS pursued a strict fiscal plan aimed at reducing the public debt. In addition, laws aiming

to stimulate temporary work for young people increased the precariousness of the labour market. Finally, D'Alema's government actively participated in the NATO war in Kosovo, despite the opposition of the more leftist sectors of the coalition. All these factors produced widespread disappointment in the DS' traditional constituencies (the so-called *popolo della sinistra*, 'people of the left').

The electoral stagnation of the DS ended up strengthening those factions that were convinced of the obsolescence of the socialist tradition and sought to transform the electoral alliance with the centre into a real reformist party. Yet even this new party has remained (predictably) unsuccessful. Despite being presented as an attempt to modernise Italian (and European) politics, the birth of the PD is not the last step of a coherent and innovative strategy aimed at going beyond social democracy; in reality, it results from the historic defeat of the moderate Italian left, which has been unable to win large-scale support or to build a strong and credible social-democratic alternative to the centre-right.

A new party: A new model?

The process which led to the creation of the PD accelerated in 2007 when it became evident that the *Unione* coalition supporting the new Prodi government, formed in 2006, was too fragmented to endure.⁶ In the immediately preceding years the DS and the Margherita ('the Dasiy', bringing together the PPI and other moderate parties) had decided to create common lists for the regional, European and parliamentary elections. The relative success of these lists prompted the leaders of the two parties to go beyond a purely electoral agreement and to call for the creation of a new reformist party. Romano Prodi, re-elected Prime Minister in 2006, warmly backed this initiative, since he thought that the support of a large reformist party in the *Unione* would strengthen his position vis-à-vis the small parties of the radical left and of the centre. In general, since the DS had been unable to increase its electoral base, there was 'a widespread awareness of the need for a large party that would play, within the centre left, the same role of 'coalition maker' that Berlusconi and Forza Italia play[ed] on the centre right' (Newell, 2008: 4).

In the spring of 2007, many intellectuals contributed to the debate about the organisational form of this new political movement. Salvatore Vassallo, an important political scientist, stated that the Democratic Party should dismiss the worn-out ideologies of the twentieth century. In his view, the PD ought to be an open, federal and plural party and not simply an alliance between two distinct cultures (socialist and Catholic), which belonged to the First Republic (Vassallo, 2007). The PD had to become, using Pippa Norris' definition, a bridging party rather than a bonding party (Norris, 2004: 9-11). The bridging party, which tries to create a broad

and heterogeneous network of supporters, is indeed typical of majoritarian and bipolar political systems, whereas the bonding party, characterised by a well-defined and exclusive identity, is better suited to proportional and consociational systems. The creation of a large bridging party, holding 'at least 40 per cent of the vote', was therefore seen as a pre-condition for eliminating the 'fractionalism' which affected Italian politics (Vassallo, 2007).

Meanwhile, both the DS and the Margherita held their last congresses, to ratify the decision to merge as the PD. Bordandini, Di Virgilio and Raniolo interviewed some delegates participating in the two congresses to see if, with the creation of the PD, Democrat militants were also created. Interestingly, the results of their research show that the path to the creation of a new common identity is much longer than the leaders imagined. Although almost all the Margherita and DS delegates welcomed the birth of the new PD, from this survey it emerges that the Margherita delegates were 'more worried about their cultural identity' whereas the Left Democrats were 'more afraid of disagreements relating to the decision-making processes and saw questions linked to cultural identity ... as less problematic' (Bordandini et al., 2008: 309). However, what is more striking is that 72 per cent of the DS delegates, and only 37 per cent of those of the Margherita, saw the PD as a social-democratic party. On the other hand, 49 per cent of the Margherita delegates viewed the PD as a Catholic party whereas only 36 per cent of the DS membership shared their view (Bordandini et al., 2008: 310). Other differences emerge with regard to important issues such as civil rights, future alliances and the role of the Church. It is therefore evident that the two components of the party are still significantly divided. Moreover, the attachment of DS members to the social-democratic tradition still appears very strong. This suggests that social democracy, despite its crisis, continues to be dominant among old militants. Consequently, in the future, 'constructing a sense of shared belonging' will be a real challenge for the PD.

On 14 October 2007, the primary election to choose the national Democratic leader took place. Participation was high, with more than three million voters. It was the first time in Europe that so many voters had contributed to the choice of a party leader. It therefore seemed that the goal of creating a bridging party had been fully accomplished. Walter Veltroni, considered as the 'natural' leader from the beginning, easily won the competition obtaining 75.8 per cent of vote.

Immediately after having been appointed secretary, Veltroni started challenging the small parties of the centre-left coalition and 'declared that at the next election the PD would run alone, whatever the electoral law' (Newell 2008: 7). Many observers consider this decision as the main cause of Prodi's collapse. As a matter of fact, the small parties of the centre felt

threatened by Veltroni's decision and decided to leave the coalition, thus provoking a governmental crisis. New elections were therefore called. The right-wing coalition (composed of Berlusconi's People of Freedom (Popolo della Libertà, PDL) and the Northern League) won the elections as expected, obtaining a large majority. So, at first glance, Veltroni's strategy may appear suicidal, since it brought down the Unione government and occasioned a centre-right victory. Yet the Prodi government had already become very unpopular because of the quarrelsomeness of a fragmented coalition and was very unlikely to win the following election. Therefore, in Veltroni's view, building a new unitary entity was 'the main means to break the vicious circle of fragmentation' (Floridaia, 2008: 321), though in the short run it was electorally costly. Veltroni could 'hope to bring about a reduction in party-system fragmentation, for voters considering supporting a minor party would be forced to decide between a vote for their *most* preferred choice and a *voto utile* (useful vote) for the party alliance most likely to defeat the prospect of their *least* preferred outcome' (Carbone and Newell, 2008: 142).

Nevertheless, his strategy was not completely coherent. In fact, the PD, after closely evaluating the opinion polls, agreed to enter a coalition arrangement with the populist IdV led by the former magistrate, Antonio Di Pietro. This decision to build a 'mini coalition' diminished the clarity of the decision to run autonomously (Floridaia, 2008: 327) and would soon prove to be a huge mistake. Indeed, the alliance with the PD made it possible for Di Pietro's party to be represented in Parliament and to replace the radical left (heavily defeated in the 2008 general election). Now the IdV's uncompromising and radical opposition to Berlusconi is seriously destabilising the moderate PD whose opposition is considered too mild and ineffective. As a consequence, in the last European election many former PD voters turned to the IdV, doubling its votes.

The strategy adopted by the PD towards the radical left has been very different. As a matter of fact, since the Prodi Government's collapse, the PD has switched from pragmatic cooperation with the far left to aggressive marginalisation. This strategy 'comprises an explicit attempt to occupy the centre ground permanently, to de-link the social-democratic party from trade unions and to adopt a more "pragmatic/technocratic image" modelled on the US Democratic Party as a progressive non-socialist catch-all party'. Since much emphasis is put on modernity and renovation, 'the far left is portrayed, explicitly or implicitly, as retrograde' (March, 2008: 15). This shift of social democracy towards the centre potentially opens up a vacuum for the far left to fill. Indeed, in 'several European countries left wing parties' have gained from the 'perceived rightward shifts' of social democrats (Olsen, 2007: 207). This, however, has not happened in Italy and the radical left is now suffering a crisis perhaps more serious than the PD's troubles. As the results of the last European elections demonstrate,⁷ this

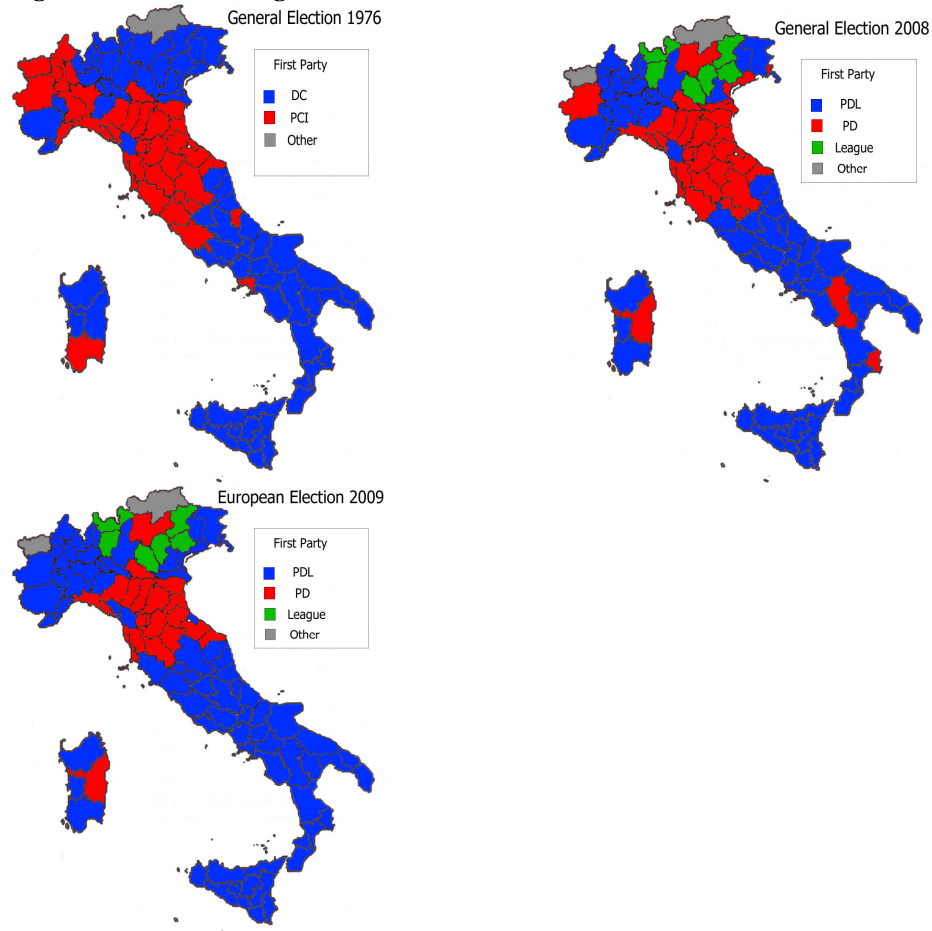
situation probably reflects a general crisis of the 'two lefts' in Europe, a crisis which, according to former RC leader, Fausto Bertinotti, makes it necessary to go beyond the traditional division between moderate and radical left.⁸

The decision to give life to a large reformist party was not only motivated by the desire to simplify the Italian party system. Veltroni thought that building a new political movement, completely disconnected from the past, would also help the centre left attract the support of a more socially and geographically heterogeneous coalition and thus become an authentic *Volkspartei*. He recognised that, in previous years, the DS had not been able to expand its electoral support beyond the PCI's old strongholds (Diamanti, 2003: 93). The DS was therefore considered more a regional than a national party. In addition, it was more popular among public-sector employees and intellectuals than among blue-collar workers and small and medium-sized entrepreneurs, who, since 1992, had consistently voted for the League and for Berlusconi. The chronic weakness of the DS in Northern Italy – the most dynamic and affluent area of the country – was indeed worrying. So, since D'Alema's 'catch-all' strategy had failed in the 1990s, Veltroni decided instead to adopt a cartel-party strategy. Consequently, his election campaign, 'aping Barack Obama's motto "yes we can" ("*si può fare*")' (Bull and Newell, 2009: 338), was radically different from the previous ones. Veltroni's leadership coordinated the various aspects of the party and the definition of its brand. The construction of the identity, its spatial collocation, and the alliances and loyalties of its sympathisers completely depended upon the leader and his collaborators (Bordandini et al., 2008: 319). In sum, Veltroni resembled the democratic Caesarist leader theorised by Max Weber. In this respect, the resort to the primary election to select the leader was not aimed at 'democratising' the party but at making it more plebiscitary. 'Berlusconism' seemed to have finally conquered the left.

This 'elitist' conception of the party is directly connected to the embarrassing emptiness of its economic programme. Indeed, the classic progressive principle of social equality has been totally replaced by the more liberal and vague principle of equality of opportunity.⁹ On the one hand, the PD recognises that the market should be regulated, 'since society should not become a "market society", where personal relationships are driven only by economic interests' (*Manifesto dei Valori* 2007, p.7 my translation.). Yet, on the other hand, the PD manifesto states that 'an open market is fundamental to promote economic growth. The State should not intervene in the economy but only set the basic rules for the correct functioning of the market. It should improve competitiveness through liberalisation policies which promote innovation and efficiency' (*Manifesto dei Valori* 2007, pp.5-6). Trade unions are not even mentioned in the

manifesto and flexibility (at least as opposed to precariousness) is viewed as necessary in the new labour market. Overall, in the PD manifesto we find a confused mix of those principles that usually animate a classic-moderate liberal party.

Figure 1: The shrinking Red-Belt



Source: Maps by Davide and Marco Vampa, data taken from the Ministero dell'Interno website.

Was Veltroni's strategy rewarding in the end? Could the innovations he established represent an effective answer to the crisis of Italian, and European, social democracy? First, if we analyse the results of the last general and European elections, we immediately realise that the attempt to emancipate the PD from its Communist past has not completely succeeded.

Figure 1 shows that the PD is still strong in the so-called Red Belt where the 'social-communists' used to win more than 50 per cent of the vote. In general, Italian political geography has changed very little in the last fifteen years and the PD has failed to go beyond the electoral perimeter of the DS and the Margherita (Pasquino, 2009: 27). The behaviour of the Italian electorate is therefore characterised by strong continuities that cannot be subverted overnight by a superficial innovation process such as Veltroni's. In 2008, the PD obtained 33 per cent of the national vote. Consequently, Veltroni emphasised that, for the first time, there was an Italian reformist movement whose size was comparable to that of other European socialist parties. Yet this statement ignored the fact that in 1976 the reformist PCI had won more than 34 per cent of the vote. The PD indeed enjoys more support than the DS but, in some way, it still remains a regional party.

This situation did not change on the occasion of the last European election when the PD, challenged by the League and the IdV, witnessed a further decline in its electoral support (from 33 to 26 per cent in just one year). The Red Belt is gradually shrinking and the PD is unable to compensate this loss of support by increasing its vote in other areas.

The emergence the Democratic Party has therefore produced two, unexpected, negative effects. On the one hand, the PD has not been able to make any inroads into the electorate of the centre right, since its transformation is perceived as half-hearted. Today in Lombardy and Veneto there are a huge number of small entrepreneurs, often former factory workers, who do not feel represented by the PD, still perceived as the party of tax and bureaucracy (Alfieri, 2008). On the other hand, the traditional electorate concentrated in the Red Belt is suffering a crisis of identity. Moreover, in this area the cooperative system, traditionally represented by the left, is being gradually replaced by a system of autonomous and dynamic enterprises similar to those we find in the North East (Alfieri, 2008: 155-74). These changes in the social structure of the Red Belt will probably help to weaken the PD further. The catch-all strategy, transformed by Veltroni into a cartel-party strategy, therefore risks becoming a lose-all strategy.

Table 1 shows that class de-alignment remains a marked phenomenon in Italy. Yet we can see that the PD slightly prevails among teachers, white-collar employees (particularly, public-sector officials) and 'atypical' workers who, however, constitute only 28 per cent of the whole electorate. As regards blue-collar workers, they are equally represented in all the three main political formations. It is therefore evident that a classic party of the working class does not exist in Italy. At the same time, it can be stated that both the PDL and the League retain strong connections with large sectors of the bourgeoisie (entrepreneurs, managers, the self employed) and of the new working class (tertiary workers). Consequently,

despite widespread class de-alignment, they can rely on a more defined social base.

Table 1: 2008 general election – vote by occupation

	PD	PDL	Lega	Electorate
Managers	4.6	5.3	7.0	5.0
Teachers	8.9	7.0	1.4	7.8
White-collar workers	24.1	12.3	14.1	19.5
Tertiary-sector worker	15.6	19.3	23.9	17.3
Industrial workers	25.3	23.0	25.4	23.0
Self-employed	17.3	29.6	25.4	23.5
'Atypical' workers	4.2	3.3	2.8	3.9
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.0

Source: Maraffi (2008: 94).

Furthermore, the decline in PD membership has been particularly accentuated in the last two years. The DS and the Margherita together still had more than one million members in 2007. The PD has now only 800,000 members, concentrated in a small number of regions (Collini, 2009). This, however, is the price the party has to pay for being an 'open' party in which members do not play any involved roles.

The several electoral defeats and political failures experienced by the PD eventually forced Veltroni to resign at the beginning of 2009. Since then, a heated debate about the future of the party has arisen. 'The PD should become a means to reinterpret modern society and to implement policies which enjoy wide support' affirms Gianni Pittella, Vice President of the European Parliament and member of the PD. Of course, 'social democracy is more a means than a goal'. Turning to old models to address modern challenges is therefore a mistake, according to the MEP. 'In recent years, the European left has been characterised by a mix of cultural subalternity and defensive conservatism which have resulted in the débâcle of the last European election'. In any case, Pittella's view is quite distant from Veltroni's, since he recognises that 'we should not completely break with the [social-democratic] tradition. Rather, we should also be inspired by those political experiences that characterised the mass movements of the twentieth century'.¹⁰ Therefore, recognition of the importance of the socialist tradition, although in an innovative framework, is re-emerging within the PD. This accounts for the resilience of social democracy, which, despite its weakness, can still constitute an important theoretical point of reference for the left. Unlike Veltroni, who looks to the US, Pittella's group decided to return to the European tradition.

It is significant that the leadership struggle is still animated by competition between 'traditionalists' and 'innovators', the former wanting

return to a 'social' focus, union connections and plural centre-left coalitions, the latter wishing to continue the process started by Veltroni and to shed the old ideological divisions. This debate clearly shows that the dismissal of social democracy cannot be a linear process, even in a country where this political tradition has been historically weak. In general, the moderate left seems unable to create a new successful model which completely transcends social democracy. The construction of a 'popular' and 'social' party supported by the successful traditionalist candidate for the leadership, Pierluigi Bersani, elected in October 2009, could therefore represent a solution to the crisis of the PD. The problem is that it is very difficult to re-establish a strong political identity after having tried completely to abandon it. Indeed widespread disenchantment has seriously undermined the credibility of the PD, and its new 'social' vocation is viewed with scepticism, particularly among the lower social classes.

In the last fifteen years, the Italian left has never gained a majority of the vote. In 1996 it won the elections because Berlusconi's Polo della Libertà and the Northern League ran separately. In 2006 Prodi won by just 24,000 votes and his coalition received fewer votes than the centre-right in the Senate election (Mannheimer, 2008). Yet the PDS-DS always remained the largest party in the coalition and was able to mobilise many militants and supporters. Despite having lost most of the old PCI members, the DS could still be considered as a mass party if compared with the other Italian parties. Since its birth, the PD has not broadened the social and electoral base of the centre-left; on the contrary, it has further jeopardised its political support. Today nobody knows where the PD stands and what values animate its political action. Can we therefore assume that the Italian moderate left has turned into a blind alley?

Conclusion

The history of the Democratic Party well symbolises the loss of identity suffered by the moderate left in Europe. We have seen how incoherent and tormented has been the process which has led to the creation of a new, yet unsuccessful, party. The emptiness of this political project seems further to confirm the absence of any political perspective for the 'governmental' left. To be sure, the weakness of the Italian Socialist Party, which had never performed the role of 'party of the working class', prevented the creation of a large and progressive socialist party; yet, in the First Republic, this vacuum was filled by the activism of dynamic social movements and the mobilisation of millions of individuals in the trade unions and in the strongest communist party of the West. This human capital was completely dissipated by the new social-democratic left born after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The search for political legitimacy and the desire to govern at

all costs meant paying a huge price: any left-wing alternative to neo-liberalism had to be sacrificed.

The PD, despite the peculiarities of Italian politics, can be regarded as an example of the dilemma that all social-democratic parties are now facing. Its failure demonstrates that it is still very difficult to build an electorally valid alternative to social democracy in Europe. This has produced a deep sense of frustration in the moderate left which, despite its willingness, cannot completely free itself from its past. Meanwhile, the current economic crisis is driving a worrying ascent of populism and both the radical and the moderate left seem unable to react to a phenomenon which threatens to marginalise them forever.

The crisis of social democracy reflects a broader crisis of representative democracy in Europe. Political parties have undergone a process of radical de-ideologisation and de-structuring which has transformed them into almost unaccountable oligarchies. To put it in Peter Mair's words, parties 'have... neglected their representative role' (Mair, 2005: 24). The organisational transformation of social-democratic parties has had strong effects on their cultural and political identities. Indeed, one cannot but wonder how the social-democratic project can be promoted by political forces which lack any connections with social movements and whose main goals are the maximisation of electoral results and the preservation of the elite's power.

Faced with the identity crisis of European social democracy, the Italian moderate left has developed a superficial strategy, strongly influenced by a plebiscitary and Weberian conception of democracy. The idea that an Americanised cartel-party would help the reformist left to renovate itself in an increasingly atomised society dominated by the media has proved to be an illusion. The naivety of this strategy is even more evident if we think that the 'liberalisation' of social democracy has been pursued by a political establishment which, less than twenty years ago, still defined itself as communist. Sadly, 'the most visible consequence of the formation of the PD has so far been the disappearance of the left' (Pasquino, 2009: 29).

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¹ The new PPI, which in the 1994 elections ran alone and got 11 per cent.

² RC and the Ulivo reached a technical-electoral agreement.

³ 'La Cosa' had been the creation of the PDS supported by Occhetto.

⁴ The United Communists, the Labour Federation, the Social Christians and the Left Republicans.

⁵ 'The party considers the *Unioni Regionali* as the cornerstone of its organisation', Art. 11.1, DS statute. <http://www.geocities.com/RainForest/Canopy/3807/statuto.html>

⁶ The Unione was composed of nine parties, from the 'ultra-moderate' Democratic Union for Europe (Unione Democratici per l'Europa, UDEUR) to RC.

⁷ The European United Left/Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL) declined from 5.6 per cent to 4.6 per cent the worst result since the creation of the group. See <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/parliament/archive/elections2009/> (accessed 7 September 2009).

⁸ In a recent interview, Bertinotti has recognised the death of the 'two lefts' notion which he had supported in the past. According to him, both lefts, radical and moderate are undergoing a 'historical crisis'. They therefore need to recognise

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their defeat and unite to prevent their disappearance (see the interview in *Liberazione*, 22 July 2009).

⁹ 'What should concern us is not just poverty, but the lack of opportunities'. *Manifesto dei Valori*, p. 6.

¹⁰ Interview by the author with Gianni Pittella.