

## Letter From Italy

by Thomas Fleming

### The Italian Revolution



The more I learn of Italy, the less I know. Several years ago I thought I understood the essentials of the Italian political scene, that I was a Tocqueville in reverse. But ignorance was Tocqueville's great advantage, too, and it is always easier to make out the forest when you are willing to ignore the trees.

If the March elections seem confusing from the distance of 5,000 miles, they are even more confusing viewed from close up, even when the viewers are Italians. For one thing, most of the major players and even the parties are newcomers. Tell me where and in what country is the photogenic Claudio Martelli, where are Giulio Andreotti and Bettino Craxi, Cossiga and De Michelis? *Mais où sont les neiges d'antan?*

The one real veteran is Achille Occhetto, the communist who changed the name of his party. Not so long ago, political analysts were already arguing over the composition of Occhetto's cabinet. His success, after recent victories in local elections, was a foregone conclusion. For years, the communists had represented themselves as the honest party, aloof from the corrupt *partitocrazia* that worked hand-in-glove with big business and the Mafia. Now that the Cold War is ended and the United States does not worry about a communist takeover; now that the CIA no longer seemed to be funneling money to the ruling parties, the long-deferred communist victory was just around the corner.

For many Italian intellectuals, the main problem with the communists was that they were not hard-core enough, but in the past several years, evidence had been accumulating of communist complicity with the system: bribery, although not on the luxurious scale enjoyed by the Socialists and the Christian Democrats; timidity and reluctance to consider the sweeping reforms advo-

cated by the Lega Nord and the neo-fascist Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI); and, worst of all, the no-longer-secret support the communists had received from the Soviets.

Over dinner, one of Italy's leading humanists confesses that, although he had voted for the left—usually the communists—all his life, this time around he supported the Forza Italia, voting in fact for Gianfranco Fini, the leader of the MSI. "I thought the communists were honest, because they did not take bribes from Italian business. Now I realize they were bribed by the enemies of our country. Better to take money from Italians." In a television debate, Gad Lerner asks if Occhetto, the man of the opposition, hasn't changed roles with Silvio Berlusconi, an establishment businessman closely connected with the four-party alliance that formed the government. Unfortunately for Occhetto, there is no good answer to the question.

Berlusconi is the leader of Forza Italia—a name that suggests that Italy is more a soccer team than a sovereign nation. A one-time friend and supporter of Bettino Craxi, Berlusconi has seen the light, and his lighter speeches read like the editorial page of the *Wall Street Journal*. The credit for his conversion to neoclassical liberalism goes to Antonio Martino, a rare free-marketeer in a country whose economics range from communitarian to collectivist.

Martino favors privatization of the great state-owned enterprises, while the Lega has emphasized devolution, a process of returning economic power to local government. Many *leghisti* are skeptical of privatization schemes, which in the past have changed very little, since the ex-bureaucrats are guaranteed seats on the boards of directors. Catholic rightists, on the other hand, without necessarily favoring a collectivist economy, are suspicious of plans that strengthen an irresponsible capitalist class and, worse, put the nation's resources in the hands of stockjobbers and foreigners: one great electricity cooperative is now owned by the Japanese.

The Italian political crisis is, in fact, rooted in economic problems—stagnant wages, faltering productivity, and a plummeting lira that is attracting hordes

of tourists looking for a vacation on the cheap. Hotel prices have risen but not enough to offset the fact that 100,000 lire, which used to be worth almost \$90 two years ago, is more like \$60 this spring. The *tangenti* scandal might have been blown off in a boom time. Italians would have shrugged their shoulders and said, "Everybody cheats." But as taxes rose higher and higher, the response to each new prosecution became: "No wonder they need to raise taxes—more money to steal." In this climate of opinion, Berlusconi's promise to deliver 100,000 new jobs was greeted not with the cynicism that it deserved but as a life-preserver dangled over the head of a drowning man.

A major theme of Forza Italia's campaign was their endorsement of a strong presidency, an idea that has been advocated by many political leaders, including the past president of the republic, Francesco Cossiga. The plan offered by Forza Italia calls for "the election by direct national suffrage of the President of the Republic" to a five-year term, and the hope is that a strong president would unify the warring factions, classes, and regions of divided Italy.

Lurking beneath the discussion of presidentialism is nostalgia for strong leaders who have always stirred the Italian imagination: gangsters like Julius Caesar, thugs like Francesco Sforza, popinjays like D'Annunzio. Medieval Italy was a land of small republics, but as the Middle Ages waned into the Renaissance, those republics fell under the sway of some *miles gloriosus*: Castruccio Castracane in Lucca, Cesare Borgia in the Papal States, the Medici in Florence—all of whom were admired by Machiavelli.

Some of them were genuinely great men: in the 15th century Duke Federico da Montefeltro turned little Urbino into one of the creative centers of the Renaissance, and the modern city, beautifully preserved by leftist local governments, retains his imprint. They were great men, without being good in any conventional sense, but their job, as Machiavelli saw it, was to bring results: peace, stability, wealth, and if Bill Clinton could achieve any of these, he would find only Republicans to criticize his reign. When Caesar falls on his face, the

mob will string him up, but when Caesar conquers the world, it requires Cato's virtues to oppose the gods. Man is born servile, and liberty of any sort requires constant vigilance. Leave him alone for a few minutes and you will find him fashioning a golden calf to worship, and if he lacks gold, as we Americans do, then he will be content with monkey metal. *Aut Caesar aut Clinton.*

The Italians have higher standards, and Mussolini himself seems like a giant, when compared with Franklin Roosevelt and his successors. Italy is the land of the superman, where even artists and intellectuals have been men: just compare Dante with Chaucer, Machiavelli with Locke, Leonardo with virtually any non-Italian painter, D'Annunzio with Oscar Wilde. Nietzsche, when he saw the portrait of Andrea Doria in Genova, declared that he had laid eyes upon the Superman. There is no irony here, since the wish of every sane Northern European is to be Italian. In this light, the worst thing the Italians could have done was to overturn the monarchy, as they did on a narrow plebiscite after the last war, and Denis Mack Smith (the British historian of modern Italy) recently endorsed presidentialism as a domesticated substitute for the House of Savoy.

Many Italians are sold on presidentialism as the cure for instability; however, the one party to campaign on a platform of national revival was the Alleanza Nazionale, whose nucleus is the neofascist MSI. The Italian press, it hardly needs saying, went into hysterics over the participation of neofascists (Gianfranco Fini prefers the term "post-fascist"). The entire postwar Italian regime is built upon antifascism, which, like American equality, gets reinterpreted every 10 years to mean support for women's rights, open immigration, radical environmentalism, and criminal pathology. The growing acceptability of the MSI is a good indication that the postwar regime really is cracking up. To understand what is happening, try to imagine an unrepentant David Duke in the next Republican Cabinet—Fini still regards il Duce as the greatest man of the century.

Gianfranco Fini proved to play very well on television, and in the period before and after the elections he distinguished himself by his self-effacing loyalty to the coalition—above all to Berlusconi. The Lega Nord took the opposite tack, warning its partners that the

Lega had two barrels to its gun, one for the "progressives" and another in reserve for Berlusconi himself. Umberto Bossi, throughout the campaign, seemed to be running as much against as with the partners of the coalition. The reaction in the press and on the Italian right was predictable: madman, a clown, out of control.

It is often emphasized that Bossi hails from Varese, the point of which I never understood, until, driving out of Milano, we were almost wiped out by an incompetent driver insouciantly weaving in and out of traffic. "He drives like he's from Varese," observed my young friend Marco Respinti. Unstable, erratic, provincial—that is the view of Bossi taken by serious-minded Italians. A very wise friend of mine, with a blind spot where the Lega is concerned, told me that this time Bossi had gone too far. A prudent man would have known how to distinguish between electoral support that is firm and that which is merely given in protest. The Lega's failure to improve its position in this election, he explained, is a harbinger of its eventual marginalization.

Perhaps. Then again, I have heard this talk every year for four years, and yet it is only now that Senator Bossi has climbed, if not into the driver's seat, at least into the car where he can play back-seat driver. The coalition cannot govern without him, and he is prepared to be very tough on the issues that are closest to his heart: federalism, federalism, and federalism. He also insists upon no concessions to the fascists. For over a week after the election no one knew if Bossi would even allow a government to be formed. Then, in one of the Lega's famous monster-rallies at Pontida, he told the crowd of perhaps 40,000 "people who work" that he would stay in the coalition for six months. If the government failed to deliver a federal constitution, he and his senators and deputies would walk out. Another party leader declared to the crowd: "I have just one name for you: Maroni," referring to the Lega's demand that Bossi's young advisor, Roberto Maroni, be given a cabinet position, preferably the interior ministry, a portfolio a good deal stronger than our own department of justice. Control of the interior ministry is an essential step in any march toward federalism.

Most political experts just shake their heads; however, this ignorant American is convinced that Umberto Bossi is the

most able politician in Italy. The phrase "crazy like a fox" might have been invented to describe him. Outside the Lega it is rare to hear any appreciation of Bossi's political nose, but one intellectual who understands the point of Bossi's theatrics is my friend Giuditta Podestà, the sagacious and tough-minded director of the Centro Internazionale di Studi Lombardi, which is my base of operations for over a week.

The senator has to bear two things constantly in mind: first, the loyalty of his own supporters depends on his own fidelity to principle, and if he sells out on federalism, there is nothing left but anti-Southern resentment; second, the only cards he has to play as minor partner in a coalition are fanaticism and recklessness. If for one moment Berlusconi thought Bossi was a man who could be bullied or bribed, the bull mastiff would be turned into a lapdog. By the way, Berlusconi did pick Roberto Maroni as minister of interior. The *New York Times*, which spent decades justifying Yalta and other one-sided treaties with the Soviets, described Maroni's elevation as a compromise, but Maroni quickly moved to disabuse journalists of any notion that he is a moderate: his first act, after the announcement of his appointment, was to demand "a new constitution within eight months." Commenting on his statement, the *European*—the *USA Today* of Europe—now declares Maroni to be the "brains behind . . . Bossi." Last year it was Miglio. What no one will admit is that Bossi is his own man.

What to make of all this—a coalition that binds together the old nationalist right in the South with the regionalists and federalists of the North? The cement, which has the strength only of kindergarten paste, is fear of the left. On optimistic evenings after a good dinner of risotto and roast veal with good wine from the Valtellina, I can only cheer an electoral pact that combines (without fusing) the very best elements of modern politics: the Catholic right, liberal individualists, and regional autonomists. It is as if the Scots Nats were to team up with the best of the Thatcherites in a coalition with Enoch Powell—and even that comparison falls short of what has happened in Italy.

The next day, with the taste of the grappa I should not have asked for after dinner still on the tongue, I take a gloomier view. I remember what the political philosopher Pier Luigi Zam-

petti told me one night in Genova: no coalition can work if it includes Antonio Martino and Gianfranco Miglio, each of them as strong-willed as he is convinced that he holds a monopoly on truth. Besides, Zampetti explains, Italy's problems go deeper than mere corruption of the excesses of bureaucracy. It is a culture of *consumismo*, nourished by an Italian New Deal that was, to a great extent, foisted upon the country by American pressure, which, for many years, included direct subsidy of the Christian Democrats and their allies. The collapse of communism was the beginning of the end: for Italy, because it meant America no longer needed her as a bulwark against the Soviets, but ultimately for America. The United States in the postwar years was able to roll back some of the most pernicious aspects of the New Deal, but not for long: "What we Italians are going through today, you Americans will have to face tomorrow."

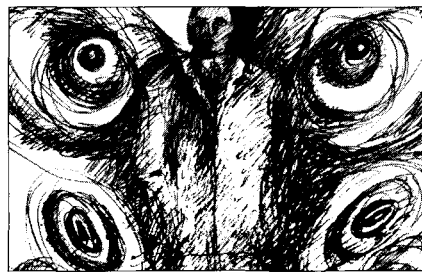
When I ask Zampetti if he has been invited to advise either the Lega or Forza Italia, he smiles and changes the subject. Later I hear rumors that Miglio "like the Turk will bear no brother near the throne." The truth of this, I cannot determine. Gianfranco Miglio deserves a great deal of praise, not least as a leading political theorist willing to take the risk and support the Lega. An authority on Karl Schmitt, and a long-time advisor to the Christian Democrats, Miglio is ending his long career as ideologue of the Lega. A superb polemicist, Miglio enjoys stirring up the hornets' nests before setting them on fire—a good sport that does not always succeed in eliminating the hornets.

Miglio's grand theory of federalism is centered on what he calls the macro-regions—three geographical/cultural areas into which all Italy is divided. There is a core of truth in this analysis that it would be difficult to deny. I spend an evening in Urbino with a group of classical scholars, one of whom—a Southerner—suggests that all those differences are in the past, but he is fighting a losing battle. "Why," he is asked, "does the Mafia control the South but not the North?" Exasperated silence.

Bruno Gentile, one of the great Hel-lenists working today, goes on to explain that it is Italy's regions and towns that created Italian civilization, not the mini-empire cobbled together by the House of Savoia. But, as he explains, the broad historical truth underlying the tripartite

division of Italy is complicated.

The Lombards, for example, did not stay in Lombardia, and the ruling classes of central Italy have more than a little of their blood. In fact, Benevento, in the far south, was one of the great Lombard capitals. Italian poetry, which we often think of as Tuscan in origin, has its roots in the Sicilian poets who gathered at the court of Frederick II; within the three great regions, the differences between Torino and Veneto, Lazio and Toscana, can be more impressive than the similarities; finally, there is the obvious point that migration and intermarriage have done a great deal to break down regional differences. You can eat pizza in Milano, although, it is true, not very good pizza.



At the Lega's headquarters in Milano, a little professor of the type the rank and file might have derided a few years ago tells me that the new Italy is transcending history and culture. The class war that justified nation-states has ended, and all the economic subdivisions of Europe can join together in a new European union based on economic and geographical regions. Noting my skepticism, he asks if I don't agree. The class war will end, I tell him, when the earth falls into the sun. I put down my notebook and suffer through a textbook lecture on the real meaning of world federalism. For this I came all the way from Genova and took buses across most of Milano until I thought I must be in Switzerland.

Populist movements, when they begin to be successful, inevitably attract this kind of lumpen intelligentsia. But the real *leghisti* I run into in the following days are reassuring. I have dinner with my friend Elvio Conti, one of the original members, and a journalist from Como, who shows me her article "Elvio Conti: *apostolo della Lega*." There remains, in fact, the sense of a religious mission in the Lega, and their faith in Bossi as an incorruptible leader has no parallels in contemporary America. Whatever may be said of them by their

enemies, these are simple, decent people, driven by neither bigotry nor greed. They want to control their own money, it is true, and many patriotic Italians find this a sign of disloyalty. I spoke with a political scientist who ridiculed the policy of one Lombard mayor who insisted upon all signs being written in Italian. What next, a Lombard-only rule? I also hear of policies restricting hospital admission to local residents, an exclusion that, if carried to an extreme, would be as unjust as it is inhumane. But there is nothing sinister in the desire to recreate a sense of small community and personal responsibility.

The "apostle of the Lega" explains: "Each of us has to work to buy and then to cook food for himself and his family. But what if we received a food allowance without having to work? This opens the door to every form of corruption and turns power, ultimately, over to the Mafia. The basis of federalism," he concludes, is responsibility. Conti, who never went to university, has a much better grasp of the theory than the intellectuals swarming toward the dominant party in Northern Italy.

Perhaps the real future of the Lega Nord lies in the hands of the men and women under 25 who make up 25 percent of the membership. *L'Europeo* quotes a young militant from Varese, who explains his allegiance to the Lega in striking terms: "I love Varese, I love my family and what my father has built on his own with his domestic utensils company. I like action, and federalism is a stimulus to action. I like regional differences. For this reason I am opposed to multiracial society; when I go to Sweden, I want to find Swedes, not Muslims."

In the empire of lies, an honest appreciation of human differences makes one a bigot, but neither Bossi nor his followers are bigots. They are people—or should I say a people—who have begun the long process of rediscovering the essentials of human life, and to do this, they shall have to forget all the pseudo-knowledge we have been accumulating, at least since the Enlightenment. What the Lega needs at this point is a philosophy and a religious faith that go deeper than mere politics, and the most obvious philosopher to turn to is not the skeptical liberal, Benedetto Croce, but another Napolitano, Thomas d'Aquino.

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# Letter From Baltimore

by Ron Smith

## Crime and Racial Politics



A recent series of articles in the *Baltimore Sun* painted a gloomy (yet persuasive) picture of "the decline of the Baltimore City Police Force." But then, why should police forces be expected to maintain high standards when all institutions are falling in what's left of America? The *Sun* stories basically explained how affirmative action lowers hiring standards, how the "ethnic cleansing" of whites in the power structure of what has become a dominantly black city results in lackluster management (though the paper didn't put it that way), and how the criminal injustice system in Mencken's hometown is just as corrupt and helpless as it is elsewhere across the land.

These facts come as no surprise to anyone who's been paying attention to the destruction of our culture, but they still amaze when laid out in the context of a newspaper investigation. The city has a new police commissioner, a cop named Tom Frazier, hired from the San Jose, California, department and quite the controversial choice because he is white. The mayor, Kurt Schmoke, who is black, calmly explained that he was looking for the best person to undertake the responsibilities of the position and that race shouldn't be a factor in the selection process. Well and good, one would think, but that wasn't the reaction of some prominent members of the "community." A delegation of ministers from black churches thought it appropriate to call on the mayor and express disappointment that racial solidarity wasn't maintained in picking a new Top Cop. Mr. Frazier replaces a black man, Edward Woods, famed equally for his political clout and for his unfortunate inability to express himself coherently. All hands seem to wish the new commissioner well, but if we are to believe the *Sun* series, he has his work cut out for him.

Meanwhile, the mayor, who became nationally known a few years ago for his argument that we might be better off

legalizing drugs than continuing to fight a tragically expensive, losing war against their use, has been AWOL in the fight against violent street crime, fear of which is emptying the city of all who have means enough to flee. The mayor is forever saying that the crime problem in Baltimore is a matter of perception, as though if we could only clear our lenses we would see there really isn't much to worry about. One can understand Mr. Schmoke's reluctance to acknowledge the extent of blatant criminality in his city, because the people committing crimes are almost always black, and now that City Hall is controlled by black politicians it's much more difficult to cry that racism on the part of whites makes for selective law enforcement. Logically, that just doesn't wash any longer.

During a radio show that allows ordinary folks to voice their concerns to the mayor, a caller said that he had been driving into Baltimore with his family last Easter Sunday to visit the city's showcase, the Inner Harbor, when his car was caught up in a swarm of young blacks, some of whom he said exposed themselves, pounded on the car, and shouted threatening things. The man said that after extricating himself and his wife and children from the nightmarish scene, he made a vow never again to set foot in the city. The mayor's response was that it was a shame that this fellow had such a poor perception of Baltimore. The truly amazing thing, seems to me, would be if he did not.

When publicly discussing the problems of America's cities one must always take care to use euphemisms: for example, to say "urban problems" when meaning black and, in some cases, Hispanic crime. We haven't even begun to grapple with some of the harder facts about America's decay. There is no discussion in public forums of something most people acknowledge in private conversation: that violent street crime has an undeniable racial component. A friend of mine, a 25-year veteran of the Baltimore City Police Department, runs a shift out of a very high crime precinct, one teeming with the welfare underclass, both black and white. If rampaging violent crime is a result primarily of the welfare culture, how can one explain away his observation, based on long experience, that the criminals his officers deal with are nearly all black. He says they have no significant problem with

crime among destitute whites. Put that in your sociological pipe and smoke it, Hillary.

A restaurant in Baltimore's Little Italy thought it a good idea to fight its customers' worries over criminal assault and robbery by hiring kids to work as valet parking attendants. At first they hired some white boys, but they themselves became favored targets of the muggers from the housing projects across the street, so now black kids park the cars, apparently with some immunity from their "gangsta" brothers.

As for me, I've joined the flight away from the city and its suburbs and now live in a small town 36 miles north of "Charm City," as boosters dubbed it a few years ago. Racially, I have a clean conscience, since several families in my new neighborhood are blacks, Buppies (Black Urban Professionals) who made their choice of residence, I assume, for the same reasons as everybody else, because they want to raise their kids and live their lives with a semblance of civility, something still possible in the hinterlands, wherein resides what little is left of the America we knew and loved.

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## LIBERAL ARTS

### THE RELAXATION INDUSTRY

Members of the "oldest profession" are now attending personal development workshops in Utrecht, the Netherlands, reported the *European* last March. That's right, hookers are able to enroll in a course that covers health, crisis management, and job satisfaction. Says Henk Klein Beekman of the "relaxation industry" employers' union: "There are 35,000 women working in the Dutch relaxation industry, and many suffer from low self-esteem. We want to help them enjoy their work."