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Italy

A crisis for the two Matteos and so many possible alternatives...

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This election epitomises something that has been talked about for some time – the increasing distance between politics, specifically the apparatuses that have taken turns in governing Italy over the last twenty-five years – and society. This time the prize for being out of synch with reality and misunderstanding has to go to Renzi's PD. [1]

Only three months ago a member of the PD secretariat, with the typical arrogance of the 'Renzi generation' had the brilliant idea of poking fun at all those who had taken part in the referendum on protecting the environment against mining. The referendum only mobilised 35% of the electorate and therefore fell - since it did not reach the 50% quorum. The comedian Maurizio Crozza who has a much better handle on reality commented "Beware of insulting people who went to vote because they will vote again." Basically you only need to have some perception of what is going on or at least to own a calculator, to grasp the idea that with abstention rates of 40%, those 35% could sooner or later have a majority and perhaps it was not the best idea to insult them.

But this failure to understand what was going on reached a highpoint in Rome where the PD already started at a disadvantage due the scandals of Mafia Capital [2]. What a clever strategy in the midst of such a scandal and the enormous problems of the city, to base the whole campaign for the mayor and town council on the questions of the Olympic bid and Roman stadiums! These are precisely the type of projects that have generated scandals and waste of money everywhere in the last decades. The ingenious idea of actually closing the election campaign with an event in front of the Olympic stadium seemed to advertise the fact - amplified by the local paper *Il Messaggero* and so much other media - that of the two candidates the PD one was guaranteeing the continuity of the business affairs of the true bosses of Rome – the speculators and developers.

Modern Politics (we still want to use a big P) has no idea of the social roots or real links ordinary people have with reality because it is so tied up in its own ordering of the official narratives that it forgets to look properly – at least occasionally – at that living reality. The economic and social crisis has been hitting people for eight years and those people who are paying the costs of this are urgently demanding a radical response, only to have their hopes continually betrayed. It is a little difficult to think that it is enough to repeat ad infinitum that the recovery is underway, that there are more jobs or even that Roma (football club) will have a new stadium without being constrained to sell its top player.

The striking voting pattern in the working class suburbs of Rome and Turin expresses the social or class basis of the election results. Just as in the first round in Rome last Sunday's vote saw the PD only win to a degree in the historic centre and in the Parioli neighbourhood [3]. In all the other areas the Five Star Movement (M5S) won double its votes, indeed it won 70% in the traditional working class stronghold of Tor Bella Monaca. It was the same thing in Turin where the M5S candidate, Chiara Appendino, hammered away about the working class areas and about the existence of two Turins – the spectacle for the tourists in the centre and the social problems of those who were experiencing the crisis further out.

There is obviously a desire for radical change but people use the instruments at hand however confused they might be politically, often in a semi-engaged way, but nonetheless with real anger, including when this means abstention. After the M5S victory in Rome there were no significant mass celebrations (unlike in Naples) but there is no doubt that the vote was a real vote against those who had governed this city for the last twenty years and are the current government of the country.

But not only was Renzi defeated but also the right, which has practically disappeared from the scene in some

places. In the big cities the PD only seems to manage to win where, as in Bologna and Milan, they are facing the centre right in the final runoff whereas in Naples they were completely buried by De Magistris [4]. Furthermore the right lost two of its historic strongholds – Varese (where the Lega Nord had governed for 23 years) and Latina. In the latter case a citizens slate (Latina Bene Comune) set up as an alternative to the PD won against the right with a soviet style score of 75%. So while Berlusconi is in an unstoppable decline Salvini's line has not benefitted. It lost in places where it claimed a strong local identity such as Turin and even more in Varese. The Lega has not yet been able to win over support within the centre right area and is not competitive with the M5S in the fight for the protest vote. It is not accidental that in the second round run offs the Lega and Meloni [5] supporters tended to vote massively for the M5S unlike in Bologna and Milan. Certainly the centre right won back some cities from the PD, for example Trieste and won some new councils in Tuscany. They hope to have found in Parisi [6] and his reunified centre right a possible way back. However what has really entered into a crisis is the idea of the two Matteos – members of the same generation and with the same name – presented by the media as the only possible alternatives.

In reality more than ever what we are seeing is an increasingly volatile or 'liquid' vote which can point to a variety of possible outcomes. The economic crisis is crowned by a crisis over the credibility of parties and indeed of any whole society political projects. This leads to electoral volatility and political phenomena that can balloon and decline very rapidly. Those observers who suggested that the Renzi project would last twenty years were superficial in their analysis of a society that is fragmented by precarious employment and where social belonging or identity of a new type still has to be established. Security is no longer guaranteed for whole layers and the sense of being in a group or class is increasingly weaker. The regime itself is weaker so the classical patronage systems are breaking down (although they can obviously be replaced by other, more modern ones). Even the stability of the M5S movement cannot be taken for granted particularly since it will no longer enjoy the luxury of being in opposition but will be judged by its record in government. What has happened in Naples with De Magistris or on a lesser scale in Latina and other places shows that alternative projects can have a different more progressive content but only if they put themselves forward in a determined way without trying to re-unify the old apparatuses and to use the old tools of politics which is something the radical left tends to do.

To be sure the particular nature of Beppe Grillo's M5S is particularly adapted to the runoff process, so much so that it won 19 out of 20 of them. In Rome Virginia Raggi went from a first round total of 460k to 770k and her co-thinker Appendino in Turin went from 107k to 202k whereas the PD's Sala in Milan went up only from 224k to 264k and even De Magistris in Naples remained practically stable from 172k to 185 k (in a city with a record abstention rate of 65%). While describing the M5S victory as caused by the right – as Fassino tried to do while walking away to enjoy his retirement – is superficial, it is true that their brand, 'neither right nor left', honest and radically alternative to existing politics, allows them to mop up the votes of disappointed PD voters, those orphaned by Berlusconi, but also where it is helpful to its cause, either the more extreme right wing voter or even from supporters of the radical left. De Magistris is a different case since he easily won the runoff with the hard core of his support on the first round. While his movement took on some aspects of the M5S and thereby cut the latter's support there to the minimum it is not a catch all party. It is characterised by a much stronger left identity and in the innovative relations it has with the more radical movements in the city. Celebrations by thousands of its activists and supporters are evidence of this.

Renzi is putting his political survival on a yes vote for the constitutional reforms in the Autumn but this is linked to the new electoral reform of two rounds. Paradoxically this favours the M5S. Consequently whichever way it goes the situation remains politically very fluid.

Many commentators have drawn similarities between the victories of the mayors in Madrid (Manuela Carmena) and Barcelona (Ada Colau) and the Italian results but the situations are very different. We have not had an adversarial social movement here that subsequently led to it occupying an alternative political space. There have been no indignados nor housing action movements like those in Catalonia whose impact on politics have deepened political conflict. However undoubtedly here there is a deepgoing crisis of legitimacy of the neo-liberal policies of austerity

supposedly dealing with the crisis and yesterday's vote opens up a new phase. The government has emerged much weaker, the ruling class is worried and is looking at possible alternatives. Political openings in the city are possible but only if we succeed in quickly ditching the idea of simply delegating power to the M5S representatives. The Rome and Turin councils could go in opposite directions since they do not have a defined political project and a structured political leadership which goes beyond the demands for honesty and more democracy. It will undergo very strong media pressure (see the role of Repubblica and newspapers close to powerful Roman interests during the campaign) and it could respond in a haphazard, clumsy way, even with a right wing political line.

But it is undeniable that a space for conflict for the social movements has opened up and if we are able to take advantage of it we should challenge the new M5S local government particularly on some points of its programme. If on the streets Chiara Appendino called for "hands off Val Susa" [7] then now the No Tav movements have a greater possibility of intervening to make concrete gains and it weakens any turn to a more moderate position. It is the same thing in Rome for the audit of the debt, for public ownership of water, for the self-management of social space and for a No to the Olympic bid and new speculative building developments. It is a question of local councils being challenged on their policies with a capability for an adversarial approach. But not in the same way in which we usually oppose the council friends of the local ruling class, who at this time are disorientated and who will try to take advantage of every conflict which opens up.

De Magistris's Napolitan experiment in its relationship with the popular Assembly called Massa Critica-Decide the Citta (Critical mass, the City decides) is still the most interesting model to look to. The strengthening of its potential for self-government will be fundamental in the next period in order to outline a possible alternative in the governing of the city. We can also draw some lessons and ideas for intervening in some areas of conflict with M5S councils. If their policies are going to really be a clear break with the councils dominated by the local ruling class it will depend to a large extent on whether the movements can pressure the M5S to follow them on the same areas of concern (privatisation, speculative developers, jobs and management of public goods and services)

For these reasons it is urgent to develop social struggles and for the movements to break onto the political stage in an autonomous way. They need to intervene in this crisis of legitimacy in an attempt to build bases of a new type, to develop credible overall political projects and to really change the political and social policies of the country, starting from the governance of the cities.

[1] The two Matteos because Matteo Renzi is the leader of the PD (Partito Democratico – Democratic Party) and prime minister, Matteo Salvini is the leader of the right-wing populist Lega Nord party

[2] yet another example of politicians involved in corruption with business interest some of which were criminal

[3] both of which are the better off neighbourhoods

[4] De Magistris has constructed a coalition that involves both those to the left of the PD and local campaign movements, he had defeated the PD in the previous elections too

[5] Leader of the right wing Fratelli della Italia (Brothers of Italy) and mayoral candidate in Rome

[6] A leader of Forza Italia (Berlusconi's party) and losing mayoral candidate in Milan

[7] There has been struggle for several years by the community in the Val de Susa to stop a high speed train project linking Turin to France.