

BOOK REVIEW

Mario Segni e la crisi della cultura politica democristiana (1976–1993)

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In February 1984, the Italian Christian Democracy (DC) was going through one of the most challenging periods of its history, torn between the rise of Craxi and the campaign of Berlinguer in favour of morality. In those days, the philosopher Augusto Del Noce declared to the magazine *l'Espresso*: 'There is no hope in it [DC] for a cultural *Risorgimento*. Gramsci foresaw that Catholicism, participating in politics, was heading for suicide. Nevertheless, the Catholic world and the DC, in particular, have been unable to respond to this challenge ... The DC is a party destined for progressive decline.' Del Noce was giving voice to an increasingly widespread sentiment coming from within the Catholic world: the need to return to 'a creative presence' in society and politics.

But his voice was not the first to call for a renewal of Christian Democracy. Indeed, since the 1976 national election, a group of young neo-deputies had diagnosed the party's crisis as due – in their view – to the Moroist strategy of convergence toward the Italian Communist Party. They therefore launched a series of initiatives to reform the political system, but without succeeding in leading the party out of its crisis.

In *Mario Segni e la crisi della cultura politica democristiana (1976–1993)*, Paolo Carusi offers a comprehensive analysis of the birth, development, and end of the party's *corrente* – Proposta – and the political trajectory of its leader, Mario Segni. The author's examination of this political and human vicissitude – often relegated to the margins by Christian Democracy historiography – is not just enlightening, but also provides a deep understanding of the historical and political context. Segni skilfully shepherds the reader into a historical reconstruction of the socio-political transformation of a nation that, during the 1980s, was eager to step into the future through institutional reform rather than the modernisation of political participation.

The author divides the book into four chapters, plus an introduction and an epilogue. Chapter 1 recalls the very first steps of Proposta, illustrating the deep anti-communist and anti-Moroist roots of Segni's political creature. Here, the author explores in depth the support of a broad swathe of opinion for the conservative right, including the upsurge of neo-liberal tendencies, represented by Indro Montanelli's *Giornale Nuovo*, Umberto Agnelli's industrial world and the critics of Andreotti's model to 'stay in the saddle' (p. 55). The analysis subsequently leads directly to the three foundational pillars of the new *corrente*: political alliances with secular and socialist parties loyal to Western democracy;

legislative action for a market-based economy; and the cultural, moral and organisational renewal of Christian Democracy (p. 71).

Chapter 2 recalls the protest of a large group of DC deputies against the directives of the party leadership in mid-1979. This moment created the opportunity for Proposta to lead the dissident voices, thanks to the election of Gerardo Bianco as head of the DC deputies' group. As the author highlights, a conflictual relationship arose soon after between Proposta and the new secretary, Ciriaco De Mita, leading to internal fractures. However, the most remarkable section here analyses the moral question, which Segni assessed through the neoliberal lens *par excellence*: corruption and immorality, he maintained, were the offspring of 'excessive extension of public intervention in the economy' (p. 99).

Chapter 3 charts what the author defines as a 'theoretical phase' (p.127), characterised by the activities of Bozzi's commission on institutional reforms, and the creation of *Quaderni del Tritone*, striving for a cultural initiative capable of developing a 'liberal turn founded on the convergence of laicism and Catholicism' (p. 146). Segni's attempt to revitalise the political system and overcome its instabilities through majoritarian reform emerges clearly in these pages. Carusi rightly emphasises the difficulties of such an attempt in a country where Communist exceptionalism was a divisive factor within the left, and the 'deregulation' model did not tally with the principles of the Christian Democrats' populism.

'The patient is unable to become a doctor. The parties are unable to independently and effectively take the initiative to rehabilitate the Italian political system' (p. 163). These were the words that historian Pietro Scoppola used to present the *Lega per uniminale*, the civic movement with the goal of reforming the political system by bypassing parties and giving the voice back to citizens through a referendum. Chapter 4 recalls the steps Segni took towards this referendum, which, in the early 1990s, demonstrated the popular choice for a majoritarian system. Carusi shows the political possibilities that opened in the aftermath of the end of the Cold War and the events of *Tangentopoli*. However, as the author highlights, Christian Democracy could not govern this transition in a way that avoided its schismatic effects. Indeed, the DC's inability to confront the disintegration of Catholic unity meant that it did not end up bearing the fruits that Segni hoped for, but only created a political body that would spill over, in the following years, to nascent movements such as Berlusconi's Forza Italia and the Ulivo progressive alliance.

This book is a captivating work that engages with many primary sources, with particular attention to personal narratives and oral sources. Despite an overabundance of footnotes, the well-structured prose and narrative flow keep the reader absorbed. Carusi's attempt to create a kind of Christian Democracy 'micro-history' is remarkable and succeeds in providing a broader overview of the identity and cultural transformation of Italian political Catholicism in the 1980s.

More attention could have been paid to the effects of these transformations on grassroots militants. Likewise, it would have been interesting to have a more in-depth analysis of the international references of Segni's liberal proposals and their reception among Catholic associationism and ecclesiastical hierarchies, especially considering the acrimony against neoliberalism of John Paul II's pontificate.

While Augusto Del Noce stated that secularism and Western irreligiosity were more subtle and dangerous adversaries than Communism, Vincenzo Scotti in the final days of the DC – as Carusi mentions – wondered sceptically about the possibility that a new 'promised land' could be one of liberal and post-ideological 'euphoric newness' (p. 220). In this book, Carusi brilliantly builds the first steps for future historians, whose challenge must now be to reconstruct that scepticism and the transformative effects that the cultural crisis and the end of Christian Democracy had on Italian society.