

Regime and Resistance

George De Stefano (March 29, 2009)



Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò (NYU) in Manhattan. Historian and public intellectual Paul Ginsborg analyzes Berlusconi and his opposition at "Denuncia: Speaking Up in Modern Italy"

"A regime and its opposition are intimately linked," observed historian Paul Ginsborg. "The character of a regime demarcates the quality and quantity of its opposition."

Ginsborg, in his keynote address to the conference, ["Denuncia: Speaking Up in Modern Italy," held March 27-28](#) [2] at [Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò](#) [3] (NYU) in Manhattan, was concerned specifically with the nature of the regime of Premier Silvio Berlusconi, and the forces that oppose it.



The British-born Ginsborg became a professor of contemporary European history at the Università di Firenze in 1992, after many years of teaching at Cambridge University. He has written several highly-regarded books, including "A History of Contemporary Italy: Society and Politics, 1943-1988," and "Italy and Its Discontents, 1981-2001," which radical scholar Perry Anderson has called "two of the most commanding histories of postwar Italy."

Ginsborg, 64, also is a man of the Left who has distinguished himself as a passionate defender of democracy in his adopted country. He has been at the forefront of the opposition to Berlusconi over the past 15 years and has participated in campaigns to unify Italy's fractious Left. This soft-spoken, transplanted Englishman, of Jewish heritage, is one of Italy's most prominent and respected public intellectuals.

During his hour-long talk at Casa Italiana, Ginsborg noted how difficult it is to oppose a regime that, for all its abuses of power, operates within a political system that still is democratic. He said that although he regards political satirist [Sabina Guzzanti](#) [4] as Italy's "bravest and most brilliant comedian," he disagrees with her contention that Italy is no longer a democracy. Contrasting



Guzzanti's "menaced" position in Italy – she lost her TV show "RAIot" and has faced intense harassment and legal threats – with the acceptance accorded great and scabrous 18th century British satirists like Hogarth, Ginsborg understands why Guzzanti believes that Italian democracy has been mortally wounded.

Silvio Berlusconi by Sabina Guzzanti ("L'Ottavo Nano"- RAI TELEVISION)

He maintained, however, that Italy, even in "the era of Silvio B," remains a democracy. Voting rights, and freedom of speech and assembly continue to exist. The continued existence of these freedoms, he argued, "makes acquiescence [to the regime] more likely than opposition."

Ginsborg acknowledged that Italy is "a democracy of a particular sort," while taking issue with the

notion,

popular elsewhere in Europe, that it is not a "normal" democracy, or nation. He noted that British democracy lacks transparency and restricts the flow of information, while even Sweden, often extolled as a progressive model, has perpetrated "negative eugenics," including forced sterilization.

Italy, like Britain, is a center-right country, and long has been so, he said. He went on to note that in



the Berlusconi era, Italy has been variously described as neo-Fascist, as a “videocracy,” a “post-democracy,” and also as “nihilistic,” in the sense that Berlusconi’s regime is concerned only with the perpetuation of its own existence and its power. Ginsborg cited the regime’s “patrimonialism,” in which the leader furthers the interest of himself and his clan, engaging in vertical patron-client relationships while demonstrating scant respect for public institutions. Berlusconi’s conception of freedom, Ginsborg noted, is essentially a negative one; it prizes freedom from taxes, freedom from the State, freedom from social responsibility.

In today’s Italy, governed by Berlusconi’s “people of freedom” coalition, there is “a surface image of normal everyday life, with all the rights of a democracy” while at the same time the regime engages in a “constant undermining of formal freedoms.” Berlusconi’s immense wealth and control of mass media, especially commercial television, means “there is no level playing field” in elections. He works to erode the balance of powers in Italian governance, constantly attacking the judiciary and the presidency, and “deriding” the legislature. In February Berlusconi even suggested that Italy’s parliament could do its work faster and more efficiently if only party heads (*capigruppi*), and not individual legislators, were allowed to vote.

After his comments about Berlusconi’s government, Ginsborg turned to the opposition. Noting the

difficulty of mounting an effective counterforce to a formally democratic regime, he nonetheless was unsparing in his criticism of the Left’s failures. The “official Left,” led by the Partito democratico (Democratic Party), deserves the “invertebrate” epithet bestowed by Perry Anderson in a recent essay in the *London Review of Books*. “The major political party of the Left refuses to fight,” said Ginsborg. “It refuses to see the dangers of this regime” and instead “puts its head in the sand and hopes things will get better.” Even worse, the party, and its hapless ex-leader Walter Veltroni, offered to work with Berlusconi after his most recent electoral victory.

Efforts to unite the “*sinistra radicale*” (radical Left), which Ginsborg has supported, have completely failed. Parties such as *Rifondazione comunista*, *i Verdi* (Greens) and others to the left of the Democrats, instead of agreeing upon a common agenda and putting forth new leaders, fell prey to ideological hairsplitting and in-fighting.

Ginsborg, however, did single out for praise one prominent radical leftist, Nicola “Nichy” Vendola, the gay, communist regional president of Puglia. Marveling at the very notion of a gay communist leading Puglia, Ginsborg called Vendola “extraordinary” but noted that he is “very alone” on the political scene. He lost his recent campaign to lead *Rifondazione* and subsequently left the party, whose fortunes are at their lowest ebb since its founding in the early 1990s after the breakup of the *Partito comunista italiano* (Italian Communist Party).



Ginsborg noted another oppositional tendency in Italian politics, which he termed “the opposition of the martyrs.” When the organized Left is weak or embattled, exemplary heroes come forth to make personal sacrifices in defense of the Republic and democracy. In past years, the Sicilian anti-Mafia martyrs Placido Rizzotto and Peppino Impastato represented this tendency, which Ginsborg said is imbued with “Catholic symbolism.” Today, its exemplars are [Roberto Saviano](#) [5], the embattled author of “Gomorra,” Sabina Guzzanti, and outspoken journalist [Marco Trevisani](#) [6].

In a generally dismal political environment, there are social forces and actors who could present an effective opposition. These include those Italians who make up what Ginsborg called “i ceti medi riflessivi,” progressive, civic-minded members of the educated, urban middle class. Concentrated mainly in the professions and the public sector, these Italians actually comprise a majority of the Italian public, some 55 percent of the population. They “have high levels of culture” but are “descending in social mobility.” They earn university degrees, but often cannot find jobs commensurate with their education. They tend to be anti-Berlusconi, but they have not yet found their political voice or vehicle. They can be mobilized, as they were in 2002, in mass demonstrations. They formed the base of the so-called “girotondi” movement against Berlusconi, one that ultimately dissipated due to its own political timidity as well as the hostility of the “official Left.”

The other source of opposition, Ginsborg said, can be found in Italian civil society associations that operate “between the family and the state.” Committed to peace, gender equality, and social justice, they include the various anti-Mafia groups in the south, the national and local ARCI organizations, and Catholic base associations. Ginsborg said that experiencing Italy’s “extraordinary and strong civil society” was “liberation” for him after his years in Cambridge, where “there is nothing but the university.”

“Is there any hope?” Ginsborg rhetorically asked near the conclusion of his talk. “The simple answer is that given the nature of the regime it’s very tough to organize” an effective opposition. But there are “many forces, among the middle and working classes, that are just crying out for coordination and movement.”

But who will provide that coordination, that mobilization of unorganized opposition into a movement, and how? That’s a question Paul Ginsborg, modestly and wisely, did not attempt to answer.



I-Italy exclusive interview with Paul Ginsborg about Italian democracy and more coming soon. Stay tuned

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- [2] <http://nyudenuncia.wordpress.com>
- [3] http://www.nyu.edu/pages/casaitaliana/index_html.html
- [4] <http://www.sabinaguzzanti.it/>
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