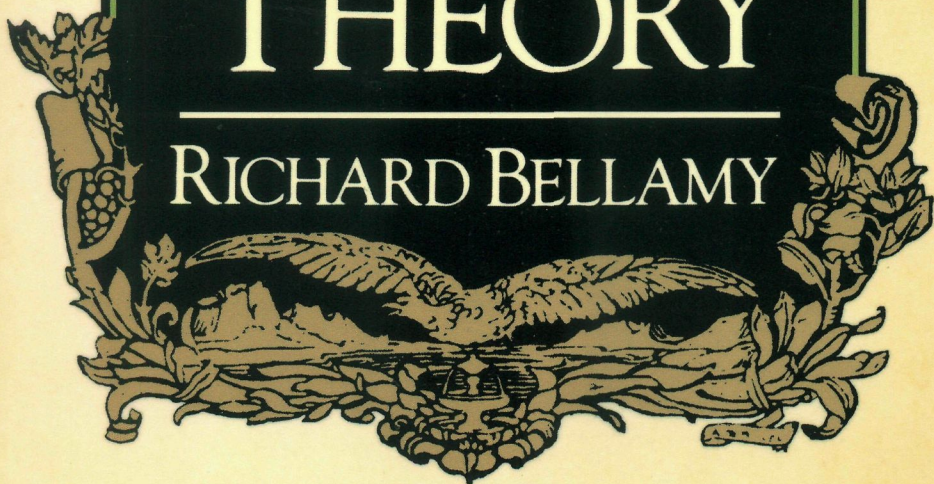


MODERN ITALIAN SOCIAL THEORY

RICHARD BELLAMY



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MODERN ITALIAN SOCIAL THEORY

*Ideology and Politics from Pareto to
the Present*

RICHARD BELLAMY

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For my parents

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The present book originated from my Cambridge doctoral dissertation on the origins and political influence of the historical philosophy of Benedetto Croce. I am very grateful to those who helped with the original project and encouraged its expansion into the present form: namely my examiners Jonathan Steinberg and Maurice Cranston, and my supervisors Vittorio Sainati and Quentin Skinner. Professor Skinner has been particularly encouraging, giving me much invaluable advice at the planning stage, and his ideas have clearly influenced the form this study has taken.

Cambridge and Oxford are often portrayed as advocating incompatible approaches to the history of political thought. I have never accepted the implied distinction between historical and conceptual types of analysis, believing rather that the one requires the other. The Warden and Fellows of Nuffield College, by generously accepting me as a Research Fellow, enabled me to test my view that Oxford destinations are best arrived at by the Cambridge road. I have greatly benefited from my residence here, and trust that my debts to Oxford political theorists are as conspicuous as the influence of Cambridge intellectual historians.

Both style and content would have been a great deal more obscure than they actually are, but for Jon Brooks and Louise Dominian's careful reading of the whole manuscript. Without their support, together with the rest of the 'Charles Street Gang', I would never have completed it. John Thompson at Polity Press provided the right balance of enthusiasm and advice to encourage a first-time author and get me to write a book which I hope more than my immediate colleagues and friends will read. Finally, Katie Draper and Elaine Herman valiantly word-processed my manuscript through all its various stages with admirable speed and accuracy. The dedication requires no explanation, but I am indebted to my Dad for taking time off from teaching and research in physics at Pisa University and CERN to search out a number of references and texts unobtainable in England.

1

INTRODUCTION

The unification of Italy – making the ideal real

The Italian state existed as a theoretical ideal long before it became a practical reality. Nineteenth-century Italian social and political theorists concentrated on constructing and agitating for an ideal Italian state united more by a shared culture than by common political institutions. They blamed the social and economic differences between classes and regions on the largely foreign-backed regimes which governed the various parts of the peninsula. When unification was achieved finally in 1861, it seemed to many intellectuals that, in the words of Carducci, 'the epoch of the infinitely great had been followed by the farce of the infinitely small . . .'.¹ Disillusionment and dissatisfaction with the reality of the political settlement linked thinkers of all ideological and methodological persuasions. For the earlier ideal continued to inspire the ideas and actions of Italian social theorists, although they had to turn their attention to finding new explanations to account for its failure to materialize. Thus fifty years later, when the editor of the Florentine journal *La Voce* sought a phrase representative of the diverse aspirations of his contributors,² he chose the words of Giovanni Amendola – 'The Italy of today does not please us' (*L'Italia com'è oggi non ci piace*).³ As I shall show below, the divergence between 'the higher concept of life and individual morality' of the intellectual elite and the values governing Italian political life formed a constant theme in the culture of modern Italy,⁴ and the tension between theory and practice became the main preoccupation of political thinkers from the Risorgimento to the Second World War.

I

This book provides an outline of the principal texts of the six main social and political theorists of this period: Pareto, Mosca, Labriola,

Croce, Gentile and Gramsci, and a chapter on a discussion between two philosophers writing after 1945, della Volpe and Bobbio, concerning the policies of the Italian Communist Party. As such, I cannot pretend to offer a complete history of modern Italian social theory.⁵ However, I have not restricted myself simply to giving an account of the major works of the thinkers under consideration either. Some people conceive social theory as timeless ruminations on the eternal problems of political organization. Others, whilst acknowledging recurrent themes in the history of social thought, regard it as addressing a particular set of issues arising out of a given society at such-and-such a time.⁶ In adopting this latter approach, I consider two factors which served to place a range of problems on the agenda of Italian social theorists. The first is the social and economic condition of contemporary Italy, and the development of political institutions since 1870. The second is the intellectual tradition in which they thought and wrote. The questions they posed themselves were constrained and in part constituted by the norms of current political discourse. As a result, issues and difficulties which seem central to us today often did not arise for them, whilst they concentrated on many areas peripheral to or ignored by current social theorists. Reconstructing the political and intellectual contexts of the principal writings examined here has made it necessary to advert to more ephemeral literature, both by the chief protagonists and other, lesser, figures. A more complex history of Italian politics and ideology, therefore, underpins the analysis of the classic texts.

This dual perspective will, I hope, help in the examination of the key issue of the Italian political tradition – namely the relations between theory and action. The methodology outlined above is particularly relevant here, since the political intent of a given work can be inferred from the manner in which the author manipulated prevailing ideological assumptions concerning a particular practical context.⁷ Thus for some writers, notably Pareto, the connection between ideology and political behaviour was purely instrumental, presenting an *ex post facto* justification of action performed for quite different, usually irrational, motives. Others, like Gramsci, regarded the relationship between the two less cynically – they specifically sought to develop a critique of erroneous forms of thought and to elaborate an alternative political culture as the basis for a new politics. Both projects exploited similar ideological conventions to different political purposes – in Gramsci's case with Pareto's work and that of similarly-minded thinkers, such as Michels, in mind. In spite of their differences, both Gramsci and Pareto shared a common concern with a certain set of problems: the relationship of elites to

masses, the role of ideology in legitimating political power, the organization of parties, the rational arrangement of productive forces; and divided a similar lack of interest in other problems, such as constitutional and institutional questions. Thus whilst they challenged conventional wisdom on these issues, they were also subtly constrained by contemporary definitions of the political sphere. Understanding either theorist, therefore, involves an appreciation of the interrelationship between shifting political relations and alterations in intellectual conventions, not just to explain one by the other, but because of the mutual dependence and internal dynamics of both.

Finally, this method may shed light on the kind of political and intellectual environments which have generated some of the concepts and approaches of current social thought, revealing their contingent and necessary elements.⁸ The historical approach to social and political theory had often been charged with foreclosing the possibility of investigating the theoretical or conceptual validity of past bodies of thought, and thus of advocating antiquarianism.⁹ This characterization trivializes and misrepresents the relationship of social theory to its past. When we turn to the history of thought it is naturally and inevitably with our present concerns in mind. However, to learn from any thinker one must first try as far as possible to understand what they are saying in a historical context, and only then decide which issues we find relevant and reject others with little bearing on our own societies. Thus the ideas of the Levellers on liberty, property and democracy are still believed pertinent by some people today, but nobody, as far as I know, wants us to return to the framework of ancient constitutionalism within which they were originally developed. Yet it is because salient aspects of these theories only make sense within their original context that they have a limited application for us today – a fact revealed by an historical approach rather than a conceptual analysis which applies anachronistic and parochial standards.

Whilst knowledge of the origins of these ideas aids our understanding of their true force and limitations, to base our criteria of relevance solely on whether or not they echo our own beliefs and judgements would prevent our learning from the past. History renders an important service because it makes us aware both of the varieties of political discourse and of the evaluative assumptions implicit in our own. We can locate, for example, the different social and linguistic contexts to which political terms such as justice, liberty or democracy have referred in earlier times, perhaps forcing us to change or expand our ideas on the subject. The relevance of a

previous body of thought not infrequently derives from its *dissimilarity* to contemporary theories, helping us avoid incarceration within a present school of philosophy. The study of social and political concepts, in sum, is not a self-sufficient study, but requires history as its natural accompaniment. For these concepts change as social life changes; the two processes are inextricably linked. Thus in providing a historical survey of these thinkers, I wish neither to immure them in a museum, nor to provide a parentage for some pet theory of my own concerning the ills of modern society or their cure. Rather it is an investigation of a particular tradition of social and political thought, which by presenting familiar ideas on unfamiliar terrain will perhaps make us less confident to pronounce on the 'invariant' and 'omnipresent . . . *central* features of our social experience'. Herein lies the 'important *educative* task of intellectual history.'¹⁰

II

The above discussion risks becoming over-generalized and too programmatic. I shall therefore briefly describe the main elements of the socio-political and ideological contexts prevailing in 1860, and highlight a number of the core themes which recur in the six main thinkers explored in the rest of this book.

The social and political problems facing the new state were twofold. They consisted essentially of cultural and economic divisiveness between both the educated classes and the unschooled masses, and between the different Italian territories, particularly the developing north and the underdeveloped south.¹¹ In 1861, 75% of the population were illiterate, and barely 8 per thousand head of population spoke the national language. Only 418,696, 1.9% of the population, had the right to vote, and of those just 57.2% exercised it in the elections. Provincial differences provided a further source of difficulty. The growing industrial zones of the north, around Turin and Milan, contrasted sharply with the declining peasant communities of the south, and the very different urban development of Naples and Palermo. This situation placed grave obstacles in the way of a unified and participatory political system. Regional interests inevitably prevailed over national ones, with the bulk of the population tied by tradition, language and economic necessity to the local sources of political power. This was especially true of the south, where landlords controlled the livelihood of the peasants so completely that few could afford to take an independent stance. The 'southern question' came to epitomize these problems, and, with the

exception of Pareto, it is significant that all the thinkers examined here came from the peripheral, mainly agricultural, areas of the *mezzogiorno* and Sardinia. As a group of writers, known as the *meredionalisti* or 'southernists', were at pains to show, unification had simply legalized the local oppression of the peasants by landowners and mafia bosses, and extended their ominous influence into national politics into the bargain. Indeed, more Italian troops died suppressing the groups of 'brigands' formed amongst southern peasants than in expelling the Austrians from the north.

Although the Italian parliament contained two broad groupings of deputies, the 'Right' and the 'Left', neither constituted real parties with the ideological and bureaucratic structures we expect today. The Right tended to come from amongst the aristocratic, land-owning class, who formed the liberal establishment and had engineered Italian unification. Principally from the north, with a traditional allegiance to the Savoy monarchy, they also had many prominent spokesmen amongst southern thinkers – not least the Neapolitan Hegelians De Sanctis and Silvio Spaventa, and subsequently Mosca and Croce. Their wealth and background gave them a reputation for disinterested service to the community, which contrasted strongly with the common view of the Left, as 'unscrupulous manipulators and common fixers, with no personal convictions and no dignity.'¹² Lawyers rather than landowners, the Left's foremost concerns were local and personal. Thus, whilst the Right favoured a more centralized government, somewhat inconsistently combined with a commitment to free trade and balanced budgets, the Left devised schemes which, by channelling central funds through to their friends in the municipalities, increased their local power base. Given the lack of party organization and the relations between national and local politics, the descent into clientalism seemed inevitable. In 1876 the parliamentary majority grouped around the Right finally broke down. Thereafter, governments rose and fell by the manipulation of state patronage to gain the support of different factions, whose only allegiance was to the highest bidder. The policy of *trasformismo*, as it came to be known (transforming an erstwhile opponent into a supporter by bribery and corruption), dominated the contemporary political scene, having its heyday under Giolitti, who effectively held office from 1900 to 1914 by means of this procedure.

All the theorists under discussion condemned this system, although Mosca and Croce revised their opinion following the rise of fascism. However the problem appeared insoluble. The two most frequently canvassed reforms were to widen the suffrage and decentralize local