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Perfectionism Without Politics. Politicisation, Depoliticisation, and Political History

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Giovanni Orsina

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Abstract

Over the last thirty years, political history has undergone a far-reaching process of methodological and thematic renewal. Since the 1980s, historians interested in the political have reworked their interpretive toolbox under the spur of the changes in Western democracy that were happening before their eyes. The article presents some reflections on the evolution of the political that has occurred in Western Europe in the age of fracture, the period of momentous transformation that runs approximately from the mid-1960s to the mid-1990s. The essay considers to what extent the political has changed «externally», in its boundaries, autonomy, and relationships with the other domains of human activity. It then analyses how the political has changed «internally», in its institutions and cultures, in order to adjust to its own external evolution. Finally, it examines how political history has tried to confront the transformation of its historical environment by renewing itself, and the problems that it has encountered in doing so.

Keywords: *Politics, Political History, Depoliticisation, Politicisation*

In the thirty years that have elapsed since the first issue of «Ricerche di Storia Politica», political history has undergone a far-reaching process of methodological and thematic renewal. The founding of the journal was part and parcel of that phenomenon – or better, as far as the Italian historiographical scene is concerned, it can be considered one of its triggers. The historical circumstances in which the re-thinking of political history has taken place have been crucial in its unfolding: since the 1980s, historians interested in the political have reworked their interpretive toolbox under the spur of the changes in Western democracy that were happening before their eyes. The new political history (or rather, *histories*), in sum, has been an intellectual child of the «age of fracture»: the period of momentous transformation that runs approximately from the mid-1960s to the mid-1990s, but whose effects have also conditioned the following two decades, up to the present¹. The understanding of the political features of that era, in its turn, has been shaped by the methods, perspectives, and instruments over which the new political history has been labouring, in an unsurprising circular relationship between historical experience and historiographical conceptualisation.

¹ Cf. D.T. Rodgers, *Age of Fracture*, Cambridge, Belknap, 2011, kindle edition.

This article presents some reflections on the transformation of the political that has occurred in Western Europe in the age of fracture. In the first two sections it will consider to what extent the political has changed «externally», in its boundaries, autonomy, and relationship with the other domains of human activity. In the third section, how it has changed «internally», in its institutions and cultures, in order to adjust to its own external evolution. The fourth and final section will briefly discuss both how political history has tried to confront the transformation of its historical environment by renewing itself, and the problems that it has encountered in doing so.

1. The taming of the crowd

The postwar decades of stability and growth were based on a delicate balance between democratic politics and depoliticisation. After 1945, of course, democracy was either re-established or consolidated in most of Western Europe. Moreover, although in varying degrees from country to country, democratic institutions imposed their rule on broad swathes of social and especially economic territory which had previously been able to escape political control, at least outside totalitarian regimes. Finally, it cannot be denied that politics was a bulky component of the historical landscape after WWII: ideology, participation, militancy, party strife were all but irrelevant in post-war democracies – even though, once again, some countries were more politicised than others².

This process of expansion of the political in a democratic mould, on the other hand, was countered by at least three forms of depoliticisation³. Although the boundaries of the State were pushed outwards, in the first place, there remained broad and reasonably well-defined territories that were subtracted from public control. Postwar constitutions and the economic arrangements of the Western bloc provide an approximate map of those territories. Secondly, not necessarily all the grounds that public institutions claimed as their own were politicised. On the contrary, public control was often exercised by technocratic and judicial bodies insulated from political pressures and required to deliver politically neutral decisions⁴. In some cases those bodies were supranational in character, and this provided them with additional protection from democratic institutions that had remained anchored to the nation-State. European integration can be understood also as a supranational instrument of depoliticisation: a way to shelter a set of crucial decisions from democratic second thoughts, and to render them irreversible, by both writing them

² On the importance of the political dimension after 1945, cf. M. Gauchet, *L'avènement de la démocratie. III. A l'épreuve des totalitarismes, 1914-1974*, Paris, Gallimard, 2010, Third Part, *La démocratie réinventée*.

³ On the limits of postwar democracy in general, see M. Conway, *Democracy in Postwar Western Europe: The Triumph of a Political Model*, in «European History Quarterly», 1 (2002), pp. 59-84; Id., *The Rise and Fall of Western Europe's Democratic Age, 1945-1973*, in «Contemporary European History», 1 (2004), pp. 67-88; J.-W. Müller, *Contesting Democracy. Political Ideas in Twentieth-Century Europe*, New Haven, Yale UP, 2011, chapter 4.

⁴ On the distinction between public and political, see P. Starr, E. Immergut, *Health Care and the Boundaries of the Political*, in C.S. Maier (ed.), *Changing Boundaries of the Political. Essay on the Evolving Balance Between the State and Society, Public and Private in Europe*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1987, pp. 221-54.

into international treaties and displacing their implementation to Brussels⁵. Once the success of the postwar arrangements started to become obvious, technocracy evolved into the protagonist of a utopia of depoliticisation which led a rich if short life from the late Fifties to the mid-Sixties: a place where ideological convergence and scientific knowledge would close down the space for political strife almost entirely⁶. The third instrument of depoliticisation worked within the democratic institutions themselves: thanks to institutional arrangements, and above all political parties, postwar democracies tried to keep grassroots participation and militancy under control, and to prevent popular will from having too direct an impact on the public decision-making process.

Although not universally and not to the same extent in all countries, after 1945 European citizens accepted depoliticisation. This political acquiescence, if not passivity, can be better understood if we compare it with the widely different spiritual atmosphere of the 1920s and 1930s. In José Ortega y Gasset's *The Revolt of the Masses* (1930) and Johan Huizinga's *In the Shadow of Tomorrow* (1935), the *Zeitgeist* of the interwar years is described as conditioned by three distinct but historically intertwined phenomena: a gnoseological crisis, a crisis of the elites, and a universal rejection of alienation. The dramatic advancement of the human sciences – writes Huizinga – has led to acknowledging the limits of rationality and realising that certainty and objectivity are unattainable. The discovery of indeterminacy has had two opposite effects: in wise, competent, and intellectually honest people, it has increased caution, suspicion of simplistic conclusions, and the urge to search deeper. But in all others it has fostered confidence in their own prejudices, allowing greater leeway to superficiality and dogmatism. This second consequence is all the more worrisome because the spread of literacy and information has given everyone the illusion that they can find their own truth by themselves. The public sphere, as a consequence, is as full of individuals that deceive themselves into thinking that they know, as it is devoid of criteria to tell sound ideas and competence from half-baked convictions, propaganda, and outright lies⁷. This gnoseological crisis is connected with the growing inability of the elites to legitimise themselves: according to which criteria, and in the name of what competence, should they be accepted as leaders? Furthermore, it gives greater impetus to the democratic promise of absolute self-determination:

The sovereignty of the unqualified individual, of the human being as such, generically – writes Ortega –, has now passed from being a juridical idea or ideal to being a psychological state inherent in the average man ... Now, the meaning of this proclamation of the rights of man was none other than to lift human souls from their interior servitude and to implant them with a certain consciousness of mastery and dignity. Was it not this that it was hoped to do,

⁵ Cf. H. Schulz-Forberg, B. Stråth, *The Political History of European Integration. The Hypocrisy of Democracy-Through-Market*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2010.

⁶ Cf. M.E. Latham, *Modernization as Ideology. American Social Science and "Nation-Building" in the Kennedy Era*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2000; P. Pombeni, *L'eredità degli anni Sessanta*, in F. Lussana, G. Marramano (eds.), *L'Italia repubblicana nella crisi degli anni Settanta*, vol. II, *Culture, nuovi soggetti, identità*, Soveria Mannelli, Rubbettino, 2003, pp. 23-52.

⁷ J. Huizinga, *La crisi della civiltà*, Torino, Einaudi, 1938, particularly pp. 27-68 on the gnoseological crisis.

namely, that the average man should feel himself master, lord, and ruler of himself and of his life? Well, that is now accomplished⁸.

If the *Zeitgeist* of the 1930s had roots so deep – philosophical (the end of the age of certainty), psychological (the pretence of common people to be masters of themselves), and sociological (the delegitimation of the elites) –, then the post-1945 «taming of the crowd» raises a crucial question: how come causes that were so substantial stopped producing effects? Historians have provided a sociological answer to that question: totalitarian regimes had battered the working class so hard that it did not have the strength to resist the arrangements designed to curb its political potential⁹. If we keep following Ortega's lead, however – «The mass-man has no attention to spare for reasoning, he learns only in his own flesh»¹⁰ –, then we can argue that the catastrophe of totalitarianism and war must have played a crucial role in (re-)making Europeans ready to accept a bounded sovereignty. Their willingness, after 1945, to entrust their countries to statesmen that were born in the late Nineteenth century can be considered a demonstration of that renewed tolerance.

2. Depoliticising the untame crowd

If we accept the Ortegian premise that in the interwar period the democratic ideal of self-determination was translated into a universal psychological condition, then the relative public passivity of the first two postwar decades may become an historical problem. Yet, at the same time, the «untaming of the crowd» that begins in the mid-1960s is more easily explained. That explanation has four parts, and in its simplest form runs as follows: 1. the promise of radical self-determination is an essential component of democracy; 2. that component of democracy is kept in check while the old regime persists, but is finally «activated» by the Great War; 3. the catastrophe of WWII helps put the genie back into the bottle; 4. yet, the democratic thirst for self-determination being unquenchable, the bottle is bound to remain under severe internal pressure, and finally to break down when the external pressure of modernisation begins to mount¹¹. This kind of interpretation is lent credibility by those authors that – both at that

⁸ J. Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses*, New York, Norton, 1957, p. 23. World literature provides us with innumerable examples of how humans were, before the democratic promise of self-determination became a universal psychological state. J.E. Williams's description in his masterpiece *Stoner*, however, is particularly effective: «But William Stoner knew of the world in a way that few of his younger colleagues could understand. Deep in him, beneath his memory, was the knowledge of hardship and hunger and endurance and pain. Though he seldom thought of his early years on the Booneville farm, there was always near his consciousness the blood knowledge of his inheritance, given him by forefathers whose lives were obscure and hard and stoical and whose common ethic was to present to an oppressive world faces that were expressionless and hard and bleak» (J.E. Williams, *Stoner*, New York, NYRB, 2003, p. 226). *Stoner* was first published in 1965, but the protagonist of the novel was born in 1891.

⁹ C.S. Maier, *The Two Postwar Eras and the Conditions for Stability in Twentieth-Century Western Europe*, in «American Historical Review», 2 (1981), pp. 327-52; M. Conway, *Democracy*, cit.; Id., *The Rise and Fall*, cit.

¹⁰ J. Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt*, cit., p. 85.

¹¹ Cf. M. Gauchet, *L'avènement de la démocratie*, vols I, II, and III, Paris, Gallimard, 2007, 2007, and 2010.

time and in successive historiography – diagnosed in the 1960s and 1970s, on both shores of the Northern Atlantic, a spiritual atmosphere of self-indulgence and self-conceit that bore some resemblance to that which Ortega and Huizinga had detected in the 1930s¹².

Since the mid-1960s, the genie of democratic self-determination, breaking the bottle in which the second world war had constrained it, generated a tidal wave of re-politicisation¹³. The various forms of depoliticisation that had confined democratic politics since 1945 were contested – those that circumscribed the domain of the political as well as those that weakened the vertical links within that domain. Western democracy was required to pay greater respect – *perfect* respect, said the most radical advocates – to its own premises. Although, once more, both the gravity of the challenge and the ability of the institutions to meet it varied greatly from one country to another, the wave of re-politicisation put European democracies under severe pressure¹⁴. Whether it was for the benign reason that they thought democracy in danger and wished to safeguard it, or with the more malignant intent to uphold the existing distribution of power, political elites tried to ease the pressure on the one hand by dividing it, and on the other by either reinforcing the old depoliticising instruments, or creating new ones. The pressure was divided by conveying it into new channels: with the more frequent use of the referendum; the direct election of the European Parliament; and more or less successful attempts at decentralisation. It is significant for instance that in Italy – a brittle democracy than others, and under stronger pressure – both regional devolution and the referendum were introduced in the 1970s.

Depoliticisation was achieved in two different stages: yielding to the wave of re-politicisation at first, and then resisting it. The first stage was accomplished during the 1970s, when the battles to re-politicise redistribution, the welfare state, sex, family, and gender led to a number of far-reaching reforms across Western Europe¹⁵. A measure of depoliticisation, in this case, was a consequence of political success: while there was still much to desire, reforms had weakened the reasons for waging political battles on those issues. Moreover, the pipe along which individual and, to a lesser extent, also social rights advanced was full of cultural and political non-return valves: once a right was granted, there was no going back. Sure, rights did not lack po-

¹² T. Wolfe's renowned *The Me Decade and the Third Great Awakening*, in «New York», 23 August 1976, pp. 26-40, provides the most concise and brilliant description of that atmosphere. See also C. Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism. American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*, New York, Norton, 1979; and, on this side of the Atlantic, N. Balestrini, *Vogliamo tutto*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 1971. For successive historiography, see Ph. Chassaigne, *Les années 1970. Fin d'un monde et origine de notre modernité*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2008; Th. Borstelmann, *The 1970s. A New Global History from Civil Rights to Economic Inequality*, Princeton, Princeton UP, 2012. The conclusion of M.J. Crozier, S.P. Huntington, J. Watanuki, *The Crisis of Democracy. Report on the Governability of Democracies to the Trilateral Commission*, New York, New York UP, 1975, pp. 157-67, has a strong Ortegian flavour.

¹³ Whether the Western 1968 should be interpreted as a political or a socio-cultural event is itself of political relevance: see, for France, K. Ross, *May '68 and Its Afterlives*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2002. Although its socio-cultural effects may have been much deeper and more far-reaching than its political consequences, it cannot be doubted that 1968 was an attempt at re-politicising. For a political interpretation of the Italian 1968 and its long aftermath, see A. Ventrone, «*Vogliamo tutto!*». *Perché due generazioni hanno creduto nella rivoluzione*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2012.

¹⁴ See M.J. Crozier et al., *The Crisis*, cit.

¹⁵ On the reforms of the 1970s, including decentralisation, see Ph. Chassaigne, *Les années 1970*, cit., chapter 8.

litical enemies even after they had been established. The cultural atmosphere, however, cornered those enemies into a marginal position, and made them too weak politically to wage an open battle. A sworn, fierce adversary of «1968 and all that», and certainly not the softest of politicians, for example, Margaret Thatcher nonetheless increased spending in public healthcare by a yearly average of 0.7% and legalised homosexuality in Northern Ireland¹⁶. By the late 1970s, in short, the «measured judgment»¹⁷ of the political elites that had presided over reformist efforts, together with the «Zeitgeist valves», had accomplished the relative depoliticisation of the issues that had been politicised one decade earlier.

The reaction to the «we want it all!» historical climate that began to mount at the end of the 1970s at least in the domains of industrial relations and public finance provided another avenue to depoliticisation. Part of this process of depoliticisation was achieved politically – that is, by waging a bloody cultural and political war aimed at subtracting broad swathes of economic territory from political control. Once again, the most obvious example is Great Britain: Thatcher’s conflictual style was by no means conducive to depoliticisation; yet many of her initiatives were meant to make political conflict on a number of relevant economic issues all but useless¹⁸. Also in this case, as for individual rights, Thatcher’s political success was connected with a cultural transformation that created a set of no-return valves: once the depoliticising exercises had been completed, those who had opposed them were too weak politically to try to overturn them. In the economic domain, however, depoliticisation was the conscious aim of a political process reacting to a supposedly excessive desire for democratic self-determination; whereas in the domain of individual rights depoliticisation was the unintended outcome of a political process that had its roots in the democratic promise of absolute self-determination.

Moreover, another part of the depoliticisation of the economy was achieved unpolitically – that is, by silently displacing decision-making powers from political to technocratic bodies. This «unpolitical depoliticisation» was visible in Britain: Thatcher started the process, which reached its full maturity in the 1990s with Major and (as further witness to the cultural transformation mentioned above) Blair¹⁹. It is especially evident in one crucial episode of Italian history, the so-called «divorce» between the Treasury and the Bank of Italy in the early months of 1981. On that occasion, in order to stop inflation and oblige politicians to curb State expenditure, the Treasury gave the Bank discretionary power to decide whether to finance public

¹⁶ Cf. G.K. Fry, *The Politics of the Thatcher Revolution. An Interpretation of British Politics, 1979–1990*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2008, p. 122; R. Vinen, *Thatcher's Britain. The Politics and Social Upheaval of the Thatcher Era*, London, Simon&Schuster, 2010, kindle edition, *Conclusions, Thatcherite Morality*. On the striking «rapidity with which conservative intellectuals and policy makers who had once defended the historical and social necessity of racial distinctions moved to embrace as their own the language of equal individual chances that had once seemed so threatening», D.T. Rodgers, *Age of Fracture*, cit., chapter 4.

¹⁷ Cf. A. Marwick, *The Sixties. Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy, and the United States, c.1958-c.1974*, Oxford, Oxford UP, 1998, p. 13.

¹⁸ Cf. M. Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory. A Conceptual Approach*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1996, pp. 385-93; A. Masala, *Margaret Thatcher e i paradossi di una leadership liberale*, in G. Orsina (ed.), *Culture politiche e leadership nell'Europa degli anni Ottanta*, Soveria Mannelli, Rubbettino, 2012, pp. 235-74.

¹⁹ Cf. P. Burnham, *New Labour and the Politics of Depoliticisation*, in «British Journal of Politics and International Relations», 3 (2001), pp. 127-149.

debt – whereas the previous arrangement had the Bank automatically purchase government bonds that were not absorbed by the market, thereby capping interest rates. The «divorce» deprived politics of the ability to pull not just the monetary, but also the fiscal lever: the skyrocketing of debt service since 1982 – in 1991, more than 10% of the GDP – would in a few years reduce the discretionary room for economic policy almost to nought. Such a momentous decision was taken by Treasury Minister Beniamino Andreatta and the Governor of the Bank of Italy, Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, with an exchange of letters, without even a discussion and deliberation by the Council of Ministers – let alone Parliament or public opinion. Violent quarrels took place in the Council of Ministers, but only after the decision had been taken. That crucial instance of depoliticisation, in short, was made possible by an institutional context in which the decision-making process had already been sheltered from democratic control²⁰.

The «divorce» would be incomprehensible if we did not add the European Monetary System to the historical picture: Europe legitimised Andreatta's decision and made it irreversible once it had been taken. In Italy, a country plagued by an age-old inferiority complex, the supranational component of depoliticisation was particularly important – so much so that «vincolo esterno» (external bond) has become a commonplace expression in Italian scholarship. Yet this mechanism was by no means at work only south of the Alps. It was exploited, once again, in the United Kingdom. And, as is well known, it contributed to blocking François Mitterrand's experiment with socialist re-expansion of the political at the expense of the economic after his first election at the Elysée in 1981, leading to his u-turn between 1982 and 1983²¹. The supranational element, however, was not relevant just in weakening the political grip on the economy. It played a crucial role also – although to a far lesser extent – in depriving politics of its control over individual rights. This was achieved both culturally, by an ever richer and more relevant transnational discourse on rights, and legally, thanks to the growing powers of non-national courts for the protection of rights²².

3. The politics of depoliticisation

The crisis of the postwar balance between democratic politics and depoliticisation, in the late 1960s, and the panoply of solutions tried for that crisis in the 1970s and 1980s intersected with the transformation of representative politics. Not only did new movements emerge, but the existing political forces, too, had to adapt to the fast-changing historical environment. In order to meet that challenge, the «traditional» left- and right-wing parties either accepted,

²⁰ See G. Garavini, F. Petrini, *Il «divorzio» tra Tesoro e Banca d'Italia. Il vincolo interno e le origini del problema del debito pubblico*, in D. Caviglia, S. Labbate (eds.), *Al governo del cambiamento. L'Italia di Craxi tra rinnovamento e obiettivi mancati*, Soveria Mannelli, Rubbettino, 2014, pp. 39-71; P. Craveri, *L'arte del non governo. L'inesorabile declino della Repubblica italiana*, Venezia, Marsilio, 2016, pp. 375-402.

²¹ Cf. J.-F. Sirinelli, *Les Vingt Décisives. Le passé proche de notre avenir, 1965-1985*, Paris, Fayard, 2007, kindle edition, chapter 7; M. Bernard, *Les Années Mitterrand. Du changement socialiste au tournant libéral*, Paris, Belin, 2015.

²² Cf. S. Moyn, *The Last Utopia. Human Rights in History*, Cambridge, Belknap, 2010; J. Eckel, S. Moyn (eds.), *The Breakthrough. Human Rights in the 1970s*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014.

or fostered, or even promoted depoliticisation. In the short term, this was a sensible reaction – the only possible reaction, perhaps. In the longer run, it may have been a self-defeating move.

The two avenues to depoliticisation that I have mentioned in the previous section – through the success of, and through reaction to, the wave of re-politicisation of the late 1960s – were not followed unanimously or simultaneously by the Left and the Right: progressives tended to yield in the 1970s, conservatives to resist in the 1980s. The pattern, however, is not always or everywhere so neat. In France – just to take one important example – many of the reforms designed to address the demand for individual and social rights were introduced by a centre-right President, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, and a right-center parliamentary majority²³. By contrast, as mentioned already, the left-wing President and parliamentary majority that came to power in 1981 were soon obliged to acknowledge the limits that the European monetary arrangements imposed on economic policy. In many ways, both the *Zeitgeist* generated by the wave of re-politicisation of the late 1960s, and the international and European rules that disciplined the economy, had an impact across the left-right divide²⁴. And political actors, as they almost invariably do, were forced to reach compromises between their own political positions and the tendency – very often: the necessity – to follow the line of least historical resistance. That being said, political actors were also able to turn strictures into resources, and use them to adapt to the new conjuncture. This is certainly the case with rights for the Left, and the market for the Right.

The culture and politics of individual rights provided a brilliant solution to at least three of the challenges that the established European Left had to face at that time. In the first place, it helped traditional left-wing parties both to confront the wave of political radicalism that had begun mounting in the late 1960s, and to try and build a bridge with the movements that had been spawned by that wave. The culture and politics of individual rights could imply a thorough rejection of tradition; could address the utopianism and intransigence that characterised the attempts to re-politicise after 1968; and could satisfy the desire for disintermediation, both temporal and organisational, that was also a crucial feature of those attempts. Once rights had been granted, respect of them could be demanded at once – it was no longer necessary to tread the slow historical path to socialism, with all its twists, compromises, and contradictions. Secondly, rights were an integral component of liberal democracy and were written into the postwar constitutions. By claiming their full implementation, the traditional Left could be radical while remaining well within the ideological boundaries of the West. Even better: it could pivot on the core values of the Western system in order to change it – and, in the process, build cultural hegemony. Finally, the culture and politics of individual rights provided the established left-wing parties with a discourse that they could use to cope with the sociological metamorphosis under way: that is, to confront the shrinking of their traditionally safe constituencies, and to satisfy their subsequent need to mobilise an individualised and dispersed middle-class electorate²⁵.

²³ Cf. Ph. Chassaingne, *Les années 1970*, cit., chapter 8; J.-F. Sirinelli, *Les Vingts*, cit., chapter 5.

²⁴ Cf. Th. Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, cit., especially *Conclusion*.

²⁵ On the complicated relationship between old and new Left, cf. G. Eley, *Forging Democracy. The History of the Left in Europe, 1850-2000*, Oxford, Oxford UP, 2002, Part 4, *Future Imperfect*; on the

Like their counterparts on the left, right-wing parties had to adapt to the new circumstances. Yet, unlike those counterparts, they aimed at stemming and slowing down historical change, rather than sustaining and hastening it. The market provided the established Right with a way to reach both targets at the same time. On the one hand, it could be presented as a place where the desire for greater individual self-determination that had resurfaced in the 1960s could be satisfied, and as a discourse it could be used to build political consensus in an increasingly segmented society. On the other hand, the market replaced the traditional instruments that right-wing parties had used to curb and discipline the desire for individual self-determination before the 1960s, and which social and cultural change had greatly weakened since then. Thatcherism, once again, with its insistence on duties and on the market as an instrument of moralisation and a «reality check» on individual desire, provides the clearest instance of how the Right reacted to the wave of politicisation of the 1960s²⁶. Needless to say, right-wing parties in other countries were much more sluggish and reluctant than Thatcher's Tory Party to embrace the market²⁷. And, more generally speaking, change was slow and nonlinear, and traditions continued to play a significant role, both left and right. Yet it can be argued that, on the whole, change followed the pattern described above.

Individual rights and the free market helped the established Left and Right confront the historical circumstances of the 1970s and 1980s. But there again, one wonders whether they had any real alternative, or their only choice was between adaptation and extinction. At the same time, though, the transformation of traditional parties weakened them in several ways. In the first place, by promoting a process of expansion of market and rights that, in its turn, implied a process of depoliticisation, political actors cooperated in the reduction of their own powers, allowing those powers to be either transferred to national and supranational judicial and technocratic bodies, or dissolved into the self-regulating economic arena. The contradiction was increased by the fact that depoliticisation went hand in hand with the multiplication of elective institutions and referendums: citizens voted *more* for bodies that governed *less*. Secondly, the process of depoliticisation compressed the political arena, making both the established Left and Right converge towards the centre, and opening room for the emergence of populist parties²⁸. Thirdly, by seconding individualism and the liquefaction of society through the discourse and

utopian character of human rights, and their ability to render political intermediation unnecessary, see S. Moyn, *The Last Utopia*, cit., and J. Eckel, S. Moyn (eds.), *The Breakthrough*, cit.

²⁶ M. Freeden, *Ideologies*, cit., pp. 385-93. If Thatcher mostly (though not exclusively) reacted to the «Me decade», Reagan seems to have mostly adapted to it, by adopting a rhetoric of «psychic optimism»: cf. D.T. Rodgers, *Age of Fracture*, cit., chapter 1.

²⁷ On the French right, see L. Bonfreschi, *Il néo-liberalisme del partito gollista tra il 1981 e il 1986: tra strategia del leader e «normalizzazione» del gollismo*, in G. Orsina (ed.), *Culture politiche*, cit., pp. 203-33; on the German right, J.Z. Muller, *German Neo-Conservatism, ca. 1968-1985: Hermann Lübke and Others*, in J.-W. Müller, *German Ideologies since 1945: Studies in the Political Thought and Culture of the Bonn Republic*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2003, pp. 161-84.

²⁸ This is very clear in France: cf. J.-F. Sirinelli, *Les Vingts*, cit., chapter 8; M. Bernard, *Les Années*, cit., pp. 298 ff. See also the table representing the temporal evolution of French political parties along the left-right axis in S. Brouard, A.M. Appleton, A.G. Mazur (eds.), *The French Fifth Republic at Fifty. Beyond Stereotypes*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2009, p. 91: in the first half of the Nineties, Gaullists and socialists are both very close to the centre, while the *Front National* occupies the position of the far right.

practice of both market and rights, parties contributed to making it ever more difficult to construct reasonably stable and solid constituencies that could support political action.

Finally, politics – Left and Right – cooperated in the withering away of the temporal dimension of the political. In a society of individuals, whether rights-bearers or market-operators, time does not belong to politics anymore²⁹. And if we believe that time is crucial in making political morality different from ordinary morality, then the loss of temporality has also reduced the autonomy of the political – its ability to act as a separate domain, ruled by its own values and logic. Even if this kind of source must be taken with a pinch of salt, the changing frequency of the word «progress» in the books digitalised by Google clearly demonstrates the de-temporalisation of the political. That frequency has declined steeply and unabatedly since 1962 in French (*progrès*), 1964 in Spanish (*progreso*), 1965 in Italian (*progresso*), 1976 in German (*Fortschritt*). Only in English was the downfall that started in 1964 less steep, while in the mid-1990s the curve became horizontal³⁰.

The transformation of the democratic ideal of self-determination into a universal psychological condition that José Ortega y Gasset first described in the 1930s re-emerged in the 1960s, and has not disappeared ever since. Yet, in order either to prevent it from wrecking democracy, or to check its ability to disrupt the existing distribution of power, it has been depoliticised. This is the concept that the title of this essay – perfectionism without politics – wants to convey. Politics, however, is still held responsible for the achievement of universal self-determination. When democracies do not pursue that aim fast enough, or – worse – when they happen to move in the opposite direction, it is politics that pays the price.

4. Political history in the age of depoliticisation

Although historiography is not determined by its historical environment, and although the 1970s and 1980s have become an object of historical enquiry in relatively recent times, it seems safe to say that in the last thirty years the methodological and thematic renewal of political history has been conditioned by the transformation of the political that began in the 1960s. The processes of politicisation and depoliticisation, in the first place, have made scholars more acutely aware of the fact that there is no such thing as a given, unproblematic object of historical study called «politics». There is a wide political domain – of which politics *sensu stricto* is but the kernel – that works according to a specific set of internal rules and mechanisms; that lives alongside other domains and interacts with them in multiple ways; and, above all, whose nature, rules, boundaries, and interactions change widely over time and must be studied histori-

²⁹ Cf. C.S. Maier, *The Politics of Time: Changing Paradigms of Collective Time and Private Time in the Modern Era*, in id. (ed.), *Changing Boundaries*, cit., pp. 151-78. See also D.T. Rodgers, *Age of Fracture*, cit., chapter 7, *Wrinkles in Time*.

³⁰ This is the link related to English: https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=progress&year_start=1800&year_end=2008&corpus=15&smoothing=10&share=&direct_url=t1%3B%2Cprogress%3B%2C0. From this page, the reader can easily search in the other languages. The reader will also be able to chart the staggering growth of the frequency of «human rights» since the mid-1960s.

cally. This awareness has contributed to widening the scope of political history to a number of new research topics and analytical perspectives³¹.

Secondly, those topics and perspectives have increasingly transcended (or rather, have increasingly tried to transcend) national boundaries. The debate on the relative worth of the different non-national approaches to the study of the past – comparative, transnational, global, transfer history – has been lively in the last few decades, as is well known, and this is certainly not the place to deal with it, even superficially. Here suffice it to say that the «escape» from the nation-State, though not confined to political history, has concerned political history as well; and to add the entirely platitudinous remark that this is largely a consequence of the impact that the supranational dimension has had on political change since the 1960s. In the third place, the growing importance of discursive elements in the political recomposition of fragmented and individualised societies is connected with that shift from «fact-grubbing» to «mind-reading» which represents by far the single most relevant development in political history – and history more generally – in the last thirty years.

Given that we are dealing with three decades of scholarship in several countries and languages, any general conclusion on the results of the methodological and thematic renewal of political history can only be very tentative. In some ways, the destiny of political history does not seem to have been so different from that of established politics: it adapted to historical change; arguably, it did not have many alternatives; yet that change has made its object of study increasingly less relevant. New political history, in sum, may have cooperated in cornering itself. The transition from the study of politics to that of the political has been a sensible answer to the historical transformation that I have sketched in the previous pages. The widening of the scope of political history, however, together with the problematisation of its object, has also contributed to making its identity and methodological status more protean and contestable³². The linguistic turn in political history had its reasons, too. But there is also reason to wonder whether we have gone too far in that direction, and whether scholars are not excessively overlooking the contexts of the texts that they interpret. The effort to evade intellectually from the nation-State coexists uncomfortably with the fact that, for most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, politics has been anchored to the national dimension, and that in the last fifty years supranational politics has not grown as fast as national politics has shrunk. Finally, the withering away of political temporality has deprived political history, in part at least, of its civic mission and social function: a public sphere that no longer perceives itself as a temporal entity has little use for scholars that think politics in time.

The Italian version of the new political history of the 1980s, of which «Ricerche di Storia Politica» has been one of the most relevant products, had its own peculiarities. Its evo-

³¹ See for instance: P. Pombeni, *Partiti e sistemi politici nella storia contemporanea (1830-1968)*, Bologna, il Mulino, 1985; C.S. Maier (ed.), *Changing Boundaries*, cit.; R. Rémond (ed.), *Pour une histoire politique*, Paris, Seuil, 1988; G. Orsina (ed.), *Fare storia politica oggi*, Soveria Mannelli, Rubbettino, 2000; P. Rosanvallon, *Pour une histoire conceptuelle du politique*, Paris, Seuil, 2003; W. Steinmetz, I. Gilcher-Holtey, H.-G. Haupt (eds.), *Writing Political History Today*, Frankfurt, Campus Verlag, 2013.

³² See the forum *The Contours of the Political*, in «German History», 2 (2015), pp. 255-273.

lution, however, provides an example of the troubles which political history has run into while trying to adapt to its changing environment. That historiographical paradigm had the political party at its centre. In this, it was not particularly innovative: parties had played a crucial role in the Italian Republic since its inception and had already been researched quite extensively. The new political history, however, was innovative in its conceptual tools, points of view, and methodology. Parties were no longer considered each by itself, adopting a teleological approach, and focusing just on Italy. They were studied in their interaction with the political system, the institutional framework, and society; the comparative approach was deemed essential; and the party-form itself was problematised: rather than being considered the natural protagonist of «modern» politics, which was necessarily destined to reach its climax with the organisational model of the mass integration party, it was seen as an historical creature, dependent on contingencies, reversible, and able to present itself in many different guises, unconnected with each other by any teleology³³.

This new approach was also an answer to the transformation of Italian politics since the 1960s. The incipient crisis of the traditional parties – faced with an ever more mature and protean society, and challenged by forms of political participation that escaped their control – both opened up the area and called for new analytical tools. In a few years' time, however, that crisis worsened dramatically, until most of the parties were destroyed by the political earthquake of 1992-93. By then, the young conceptual instruments of the new political history were already obsolete: post-1994 Italy demonstrated, if anything, the relevance of leadership and communication rather than the party-form. Also, the social demand for the study of politics in time was made less relevant by the either managerial or moralistic – in both cases, atemporal – denial of the specificity of the political³⁴. All this, of course, is peculiarly Italian. Yet it can be considered an instance of how the transformation of the political since the 1960s has at the same time created the necessity for an overhaul of political history, led to the blurring of its disciplinary identity, and weakened its social function.

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³³ Cf. P. Pombeni, *Partiti e sistemi politici*, cit.

³⁴ Cf. G. Orsina, *Antifascism, Anticommunism, Antipolitics: Delegitimation in Berlusconi's Italy*, in «Journal Of Modern Italian Studies», 1 (2017), pp. 7-26.