

Salvatore Prinzi, Potere al Popolo!

The state of affairs in the European radical left: new or reformed party-projects and paneuropean coalitions. The case of Italy

Thank you very much for the invitation. Occasions like this one, where we can come together to share knowledge and ideas, are very important, especially for us Italians. As you know, in Italy the radical Left has been going through a difficult period for some time. For this reason, we are here to offer our contribution like everyone else, but more importantly we are here to learn from your experiences, from movements across Europe that have been successful in engaging the masses.

At the same time, it is important to be aware that no matter how desperate the Italian (or European) situation may seem, it is not a done deal. The class struggle is alive and kicking. It is manifesting itself in new ways, and, despite first appearances, there is evidence of it even at the level of formal politics. In addition, the ruling classes have yet to find real answers to the current political and economic crisis, opening a space into which we as the Left should be able to step.

This is especially true for the new Italian government, constituted by two populist right wing forces, which lacks the means to solve the contradictions the country has been experiencing for almost a decade, greatly exacerbated by the last ten years of economic crisis. There are sure to be, then, plenty of opportunities in the following months to give expression to the suffering of the working classes and to become once again a mass movement. In order to do this, however, we will have to work hard to improve our analytical and organizational skills, and to accumulate more resources, and in this respect your support could make a great difference.

For us, therefore, this seminar is not only a moment of discussion but also an important political act as it represents a step toward political growth. And so, to achieve this result and in order to give a space for feedback and advice, I have decided to divide my speech in three parts:

Firstly, I will try to sum up the political, social and economic situation in Italy. Secondly, I will give an overview of Potere al Popolo!'s history as a movement that came into existence to provide answers to the problems Italy is facing. Lastly, I will attempt to clarify what we want to do in the forthcoming months, in terms of constituting Potere al Popolo! as an organization, but also in terms of working towards a season of mass mobilizations. I will also talk briefly about the different possible scenarios for the upcoming European elections and how we intend to approach them.

1. THE ITALIAN SITUATION

Italy has been among the European countries hardest hit by the economic crises of 2008. As you can see from the table below representing data on the fluctuations of Italian GDP, after the crises of 2008 and then following slight increase, 2011 saw a second crisis, this time in terms of sovereign debt. Ten years after the global crisis first hit, growth has still not reached pre-2008 levels. And even where there were opportunities for international recovery, Italy continued to do worse than almost any other Eurozone states.

Italian GDP:

2011: +0,4%

2012: - 2,3%

2013: - 1,9%

2014: + 0,4%

2015: + 0,8% (Eurozone: +1,6%)

2016: + 0,9% (Eurozone: +1,7%)

2017: + 1,5% (Eurozone: +2,4%)

2018: + 1,3% - estimation (Eurozone: +2,4% - estimation)

Why is this the case? There are many reasons, many of which have to do with the particular characteristics of Italian capitalism. Here, I will look briefly at just two.

a. To begin with it is important to state that Italian capitalism is largely made up of medium and small businesses. In the 90s, these businesses were competitive because they could rely on low salaries, the hyper-exploitation of irregular workers, tax evasion and demand on the international market for low quality goods. The Italian small and middling bourgeoisie was thus guaranteed profits and capital was discouraged from becoming concentrated. However, it also served to discourage investment in research and development, in increasing productivity or moving towards high-end manufacturing. When the crisis broke out, in order to cut out costs, multinationals started searching for new suppliers in Eastern Europe and China. Small businesses, however, found that they were no longer competitive and quickly began to go into serious debt. The reaction was to close down or cut back drastically on production, laying off workers and/or increasing exploitation through precarisation, in turn provoking anger in the affected sections of the population.

b. Secondly, Italy has very high levels of national debt dating back to the period from the 70s through to the 90s, where social spending was increased as a means of placating serious social unrest during an intense wave of struggles, leaving, however, the profits of the ruling classes intact. When the crisis finally arrived, Italian debt was exposed to speculative attacks. The consequence of this was austerity, cuts to public services and decreases in public spending, measures which had a significant impact on the working classes. At the same time, however, the Italian political system was riddled with corruption and was seen to be very distant from its people – true both of the “political” governments formed from parties of rapidly waning popularity, and certainly of the technocrat governments.

The combination of mass unemployment and savage precarisation of the workforce, along with the cuts to social services, was phenomenal. The economic crisis on the one hand and the consequent political crisis represented by the lack of solutions lead to growing social discontent in a country with many preexisting problems: slow growth over the previous 20 years with huge inequality between North and South and between cities/productive districts and abandoned suburban areas.

But who was in power during these years of crisis? For the first part Italy was governed by Berlusconi. However, pressure began to build on his administration as the sovereign debt crisis hit, and after Berlusconi refused to implement reforms requested by the BCE and European leaders, he was eventually forced to resign, and was replaced by a technocratic government lead by the ex-IMF economist Mario Monti with broad cross-party support. Following this was a long period of PD supremacy, from 2013 to 2018 (*Partito Democratico* – the Democratic Party, a center-Left party formed by remnants of both the Christian Democrats and the Communist Party). All of these governments, however, have had a fair amount in common. They have all implemented austerity policies and were all expressions of financial and business interests. And this just as true for the PD as for other governments, leading to the situation where a formerly left-wing party has come to be seen as the principle author of austerity, a perception which has, as a result, tainted the whole Italian Left.

With no radical Left parties in Parliament to present an alternative to the status quo, the 5 Star Movement has grown at an astonishing rate. It has succeeded in becoming the voice of social discontent and has also been fairly effective at channeling the students and union struggles of 2008-2011, gaining 25% of the 2013 vote. Yet the 5 Star Movement describes itself as being beyond Left and Right.

Throughout this period, however, social movements continued to mobilize people, just like in other European countries. The problem has been, then, that the “old” Left was unable to intercept them. This is true of the PD because it had now become a party representative purely of the elite and business classes. It is also true, though, of the forces to the left of the PD because they had been significantly weakened by experiences in government that had damaged their credibility, and because they lacked innovation or dynamism, being mainly focused on electioneering and internal power struggles rather than on building an organization that could serve the masses.

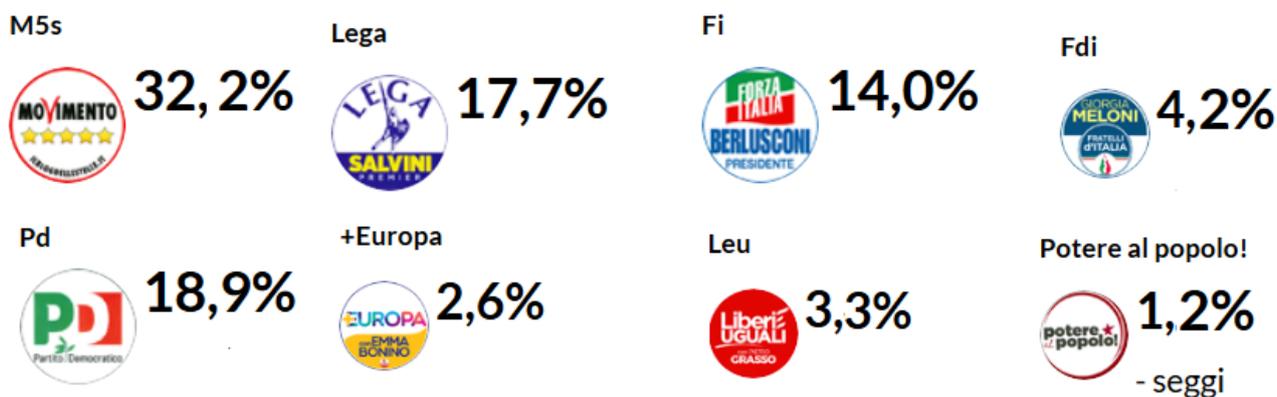
The electoral list *l'Altra Europa con Tsipras* (The Other Europe with Tsipras) succeeded in electing three MEPs in 2014, but this success was short-lived and not to be repeated. Indeed, two of the three MEPs quickly abandoned the project, which was then left pretty much dead in the water despite the fact that many of the smaller parties in the alliance had seemed keen to consolidate the experience.

And if we look at the extra-parliamentary terrain, though there were mobilizations, they were unable to produce significant results. This was partly because among much of the extra-parliamentary Left an “anti-party” or anti-organization attitude had come to prevail and partly because the traditional institutions of the Left still occupied much of the terrain, leaving little opportunity to elaborate a more innovative politics.

So while the radical Left in all its forms (autonomous, communist, social democratic) was disappearing, in 2013-2014 the 5 Star Movement, now with a significant presence in the Italian Parliament, was able to occupy the vacuum left behind. At the same time, however, Italy’s oldest political party, the right-wing Northern League, was able to somehow erase its own past riddled with scandal and with a long record of participation in unpopular governments and transform itself into a seemingly unstoppable force. After achieving only 4% of the vote in 2013, the one-time party for Northern independence decided to give itself a drastic makeover, becoming a national party and even dropping the “Northern” from its name, changing its motto from “the North first” to “Italians first”. In its new Italian nationalist guise it launched an aggressive campaign of opposition which ultimately proved to be highly successful.

The PD thus began to suffer a series of electoral defeats, and yet it never modified its strategy. Social struggles were waning as the poorer classes, after so many years of austerity and threatened with unemployment, had lost their capacity to fight. As such, they turned to the 5 Star Movement in the hope of resolving their problems.

Now, finally, we come to the catastrophic general election of March 4th 2018, the results of which you can see below. It was very clear now that Italians had lost all faith in the Left- perhaps because it is seen as complicit in an unfair and failing system, perhaps because it is perceived as ineffective and inconsistent. The League and the 5 Star Movement, however, were the clear winners (the League because, though it still gained less than the PD, its unexpected success allowed it to hegemonize the Right) and now decided to enter into a coalition, overcoming their slight differences, with a program that provides for some social measures but that is generally devoted to protecting the small and middling bourgeoisie. And the way this is being done is by pitting the poor and working classes against themselves, attacking migrants in particular, making it easier to exploit the migrant workforce and giving symbolic compensation to the Italian workforce. Within this alliance, the League has quickly come to dominate, as, whereas the League’s sensationalist tactics require only quick and easy media stunts or measures (like refusing docking to migrant rescue ships) that are cost-free, the proposals of the 5 Star, such as basic income, require funding that will be difficult to wrestle from the Italian capitalist classes.



2. POTERE AL POPOLO! AN ATTEMPT TO CREATE A LEFT RESPONSE

It had been clear for some time that the elections were going to turn out like this. However, the traditional Left did nothing to prevent its disastrous decline, continuing to offer to the electorate the same failed politics. The more left-wing part of the PD did realize that their party was going to collapse and for this reason a small group broke away and founded a new formation, *Liberi e Uguali* (Free and Equal), joining together with another previously existing social democratic force, *Sinistra Italiana* (Italian Left). This new force thus hoped to build a new consensus among a left-leaning electorate, but, ultimately, they failed to come up with a convincing proposal and those sections of the electorate they had hoped to win over, left-leaning but dissatisfied with the PD, voted instead in their masses for the 5 Star Movement. LeU, which had had its eyes set on a 10% share, gained little over 3% of the vote.

In November 2017 the political scenario presented two big risks. Firstly, it looked likely that huge swathes of left-leaning and youth votes in particular would go to the 5 Star Movement, or even worse, to the Right. Secondly, with no effectual Left, the electoral campaign was going to be entirely dominated by the Right and by right-wing discourse. For this reason, a social center in Naples, the Ex-OPG “Je so' Pazzo”, made up of about 150 young activists, decided to launch their own campaign, determined to give a platform to those who would otherwise have no representation.

The idea, perhaps somewhat situationist, was that, seeing as no one was representing us, we would represent ourselves. We wanted to reveal another Italy, an Italy of struggle and active solidarity movements. Our aim was to begin to mend the social fabric that had been so damaged from continuous attacks, to recover this history of struggle and recreate a sense of belonging. We set out to begin to form the basis of a national community, so that, no matter the election result, we could wake up on the day following the elections and

begin the real work of building a new political force, having used the campaign to accumulate knowledge skills and people, having laid the organizational foundations.

Our aim was not, then, to merely “reunite the left”, as the pundits continue to call for, but rather to create a new kind of grassroots movement, that could attract new people to radical left politics. And with this idea we convinced some of the remaining Italian communist parties, who had refused to join LeU because of its continued dependence on its mother party, the PD. *Rifondazione Comunista*, in particular committed itself to building the Potere al Popolo! electoral list, which allowed it to take on a national dimension (having begun with the appeal made from Naples-based activists).

In only a short time, 150 local meetings were set up, forming local groups which continue to be active, and the movement began to develop a capacity for action. Viola Carofalo was chosen as the spokesperson. Viola, a 38-years-old university researcher from Naples, is a Southerner, female, precariously employed and an activist from the Ex- Opg “Je so' Pazzo” social center.



The electoral campaign was not easy. The media refused to give us coverage, some of us were physically assaulted by fascists, we were intimidated by the police and we had only 40,000 euros to spend on the campaign. On March 4th the majority of Italians had still never heard about Potere al Popolo!, or they had a completely distorted idea of what it was. Nevertheless, we obtained 1,2% of the vote, around 373,000 votes. Though it may seem a rather meagre result, for us it was almost a miracle as just a few months earlier we had thought it impossible to achieve anything.

Although Potere al Popolo! did not manage to elect any MPs, we got straight back to work after the election, opening People's Houses (*Case del Popolo*) and working within the local community to reach out to more and more people. For the first time in 12 years, a left-wing electoral list did not dissolve immediately after the vote.

What is the activity of Potere al Popolo! based on?

Potere al popolo! is principally based on solidarity and mutual-aid practices that root it within the local community. We are working to revive the Italian socialist and communist tradition of the People's Houses, places where the working class could unite and experiment with practices of self-management. Mutual-aid practices are not only a way to fulfill the needs left unmet by the withdrawal of the state (by providing free health care, free gyms, squatting houses, etc.) but they are also a way to come into contact with working class communities. It is about building working-class self-management, finding collective solutions to the problems faced by the community. It is tactical, because it is a way of building consensus, but it is also strategic, because it prefigures the world to come.

Secondly, Potere al Popolo! has at the center of its analysis the conflict between capital and labor. For this reason, we allied with radical trade unions (such as *Unione Sindacale di Base*- USB), but also with the new forms of labour protests (self-organizing movements of precarious workers), and with the more radical parts of the CGIL (Italy's largest trade union), supporting all struggles in the labor market.

Thirdly, the political principle that Potere al Popolo! has at its core is the redistribution of wealth through fair taxation, the eradication of fiscal evasion, the taxation of property; a fightback, in short, against the class struggle from on high by means of taxation. Italy is ranked fourth in the world for private wealth and it is, after all, (though this fact is subject to a collective amnesia) one of the major imperialist powers. The mantra of "we don't have enough money" is only true because the political will to undermine profits and private income does not exist. We think that the polarization of wealth over the last few decades must be combatted and that in order to protect lives and make some social progress it is necessary to retrieve capital and expand the remit of democratically accountable state intervention, in order to create work and provide public services.

These are our core principles, but we have other focuses for action: environmentalism, anti- sexism and internationalism are also the bedrock of our politics. However, in this phase of our development, we want to be more practical than ideological and show people that we are able to provide concrete solutions to urgent problems in the here and now. For a long time the Left had become distant from wider society and had ceased to be seen as useful in any way. Instead we want to become rooted in the community; no matter how long we spend perfecting our ideas and our political positions, it means nothing if we have no connection with community around us.

On May 26th and 27th the fourth meeting of Potere al Popolo! was held in Naples and was participated by one thousand of people. Then, on June 16th we launched the first big demonstration against the new government, about 10.000 people. Finally we had four days of camping, workshops, and general meeting during the

summer, with one thousand of people involved. These were three occasions for us to prove our potential, at least as far as active participation is concerned.

3. POTERE AL POPOLO! IN THE FORTHCOMING MONTHS: ORGANIZATION, OPPOSITION, EUROPEAN ELECTIONS.

The latest polls are currently giving Potere al Popolo 2,5%, showing an increase over the last few weeks. We have passed LeU, even if they are in Parliament and they can have more exposure on the media: this has been a kind of shock for the traditional Left.

	Stima 30/7/2018	Stima 23/7/2018	Trend
POTERE AL POPOLO	2,5	2,0	+0,5
LIBERI E UGUALI	2,4	2,6	-0,2
+EUROPA DI E. BONINO	2,1	1,9	+0,2
ALTRO PARTITO	3,3	3,4	-0,1
NON SI ESPRIME	32,3	31,2	+1,1

Indagine condotta con tecnica mista CATI-CAMI-CAWI su un campione di 1.500 soggetti maggiorenni residenti in Italia tra il 25 e il 30 luglio 2018. Il campione è stratificato per zona e prevede quote per età e sesso. I dati sono stati ponderati al fine di garantire la rappresentatività rispetto ai parametri di zona, sesso, età, livello scolastico e partito votato alle ultime elezioni. Il margine d'errore statistico dei dati riportati è del 2,5% a un intervallo di confidenza del 95%.

Our project is clearly still only fledgling, and we face an uphill struggle both in resisting the damage that the new government will wreak and in navigating the existing social terrain to transform the movement into an effective tool for the masses. However, we have a plan for growth. I will try to divide this part in three steps, that are both logical chronological.

a) First of all, the organizational process.

We have just launched a membership campaign that will allow us to reach out to broader sections of society and not just people with a history of activism. It will also help us to gain more exposure, and we hope to be able to involve thousands of people. Once we have the formal system of membership fully up and running all members will finally be able to participate in writing the statute and vote for a national committee and the spokesperson using an online platform. Potere al Popolo! will thus end its initial phase and will become a fully formed political organization, independent of the forces that composed it. Our sense of identity will be strengthened and the elected national committee will be more unified and effective. On October we will hold

a constitutive national assembly, and after 11 months from the appeal made by the ex-OPG we will finally be able to say that Potere al Popolo! has been born.

b) The second way we aim to grow is through promoting a mass mobilization for the autumn in schools, universities, workplaces and in the streets. At the end of October the government will be forced to approve a budget with yet more negative effects for the working classes and the poor. In the same period, the European Central Bank will end its quantitative easing program, which has shielded Italy from speculative attacks. After this, a period of turbulence and social conflict is likely to follow. But unlike the past, this time we will have a more effective organization, which is also linked up with the radical trade unions.

We hope to involve, over the summer, other social and political forces and to plan the mobilization for the autumn, ready to lay bare the government's limitations and make it as difficult as possible for it to act while also holding it to account on its promises of progressive social intervention.

c) During the autumn we will also begin to discuss in earnest what our approach to the European elections should be. We believe that this can be another important moment for proving the effectiveness of our struggle. Indeed, it is an issue of particular importance for us as we are the only left-wing movement in Italy with a critical position on the European Union. As the 5 Star Movement and the League have "normalized" their position towards the EU, a space has been opened up for a critical voice to denounce the fundamentally anti-working-class make-up of the EU and its politics of austerity.

Currently, in Italy, as in the rest of Europe, the outlook for the elections remains somewhat fragmented. There is the movement founded by Yannis Varoufakis, DIEM25, there is the European Left and there are positions close to the call "And now the people", the appeal launched by Jean-Luc Mélenchon, Podemos and Bloco de Esquerda. All these positions in Italy are weak from an electoral point of view and it's difficult to think that some of them would be able to achieve electoral success alone.

It seems likely that Luigi de Magistris, the mayor of Naples - Italy's third largest city-, will step onto this scene. De Magistris, whose politics could be characterized as left-wing populism, is a former magistrate who gained popularity from his fight against corruption. Since being elected as mayor he has led a radical administration with some success. De Magistris has relations with Ada Colau and Podemos, but also with Mélenchon and Varoufakis, and is interested in federating all the existing left-wing movements, excluding the PD of course, with the additional aim of winning back the part of the 5 Star electorate who opposed the alliance with the League. The project would aim at a result of more than 5%.

It is not sure that he will succeed in this attempt as overcoming the differences within the Left will be hard and De Magistris is perhaps lacking in resources. In addition, he already has his hands very full with running the city of Naples. What is sure, though, is that Potere al Popolo! will decide collectively with all its members what action to take as regards the European elections. We should also be clear that we are not afraid of running alone, because for us the most important thing is the programme, the practice, the foundation and the rooting of a new idea.

At the same time, we are keeping an eye on De Magistris, because we are aware that what Italy needs is a radical Left in the European Parliament that has a mass backing. We think that if we cooperate with other European organizations we could do many useful things: struggle against production offshoring and the exportation of capital to fiscal paradises, struggle to improve European rules on work or to attack copyright and intellectual property laws that do not allow free circulation of knowledge (to name but a few).

CONCLUSION

In my presentation I have attempted to sum up the main features of our project and the complex Italian context. Of course, there are still many things I have not been able to touch on, though I have said a great deal already, and for this I thank you for your attention.

I want to finish with one last reflection. Although it might seem strange to say, we do not view the moment we are currently living through as a defeat. We are not the nostalgic heirs of the past but look eagerly towards a future to be conquered. The class struggle is made up of constant movement back and forth, of progressions and retreats, and we are now in a phase of retreat. History has seen moments like this. These phases, though, are helpful for reflection and clarification. They offer the opportunity to inquire, to imagine, to resume contact with the rest of society. If we work towards these ends then we will soon find ourselves in a phase of progress. Who knows, maybe next year, at the next seminar, we might be talking about our victories.

