

## **Un'idea di libertà. Il Partito radicale nella storia d'Italia (1962–1988)**

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Tomasi Di Lampedusa's quote – 'If we want everything to remain the same, there is a need for everything to change' – captures beautifully and poignantly the static and unchangeable nature of the Italian political system. Yet, time and again Italy has seen the emergence of political parties and other forms of political activism that spurred changes and transformations within society. The Partito Radicale (PR) was one of them. It was the Italian outpost for freedom and the protection of rights. Its history originated from the mid-1950s split in the Liberal Party when the more leftist sectors created the first Partito Radicale, outlining a platform that centred around anti-authoritarianism and a novel individual consciousness of the political. But this first radical experience lasted only a short time, and in the end was unsuccessful.

However, a young and even more left-wing group gave new life to that project, founding a second Partito Radicale in 1962. Emerging figures like Gianfranco Spadaccia, Massimo Teodori, and, above all, Marco Pannella, kept the old name and symbol but updated the culture and identity of the party vis-à-vis a dramatically changing society. The new leadership deemed it crucial to engage with the new demands coming from below, such as the need for broad participation, political freedoms, and civil rights, demands emerging in the 1960s in an Italy in pursuit of modernity. Since then, the Partito Radicale has become a vital actor in Italy's public and political debate, setting the agenda on a variety of topics: from divorce to abortion, from pacifism to environmentalism, and from anti-nuclearism to Europeanism. Yet the central and decisive role that the party has played in the transformation of the country and its society has been largely neglected by scholars.

With *Un'idea di libertà. Il Partito radicale nella storia d'Italia*, Lucia Bonfreschi examines the political vicissitudes of the second Partito Radicale from the early 1960s to the late 1980s, adopting a historically comprehensive and focused approach. She offers an in-depth study that finally fills the gap in scholarship, thus unearthing the major political and societal contributions of the PR, beginning with the battle on divorce and abortion. In this way, Bonfreschi skilfully restores to the centre of the analysis the stories of each party component, from leaders to fellow-travellers. In this way, she fleshes out the richness of the party's history, which is often neglected by scholars who seem to focus exclusively on longtime leader Marco Pannella's charisma.

The book is divided in four chapters. Chapter 1 offers a broad and thematic overview of the radicals' culture, choices, and place within the political system. Starting from the ruptures and continuities with liberal legacies, Bonfreschi deals at length with the continuous tension between the mission of creating a new way for people to participate in politics and the charismatic leadership that often seemed to choose a direction independently of the will of the political body.

Chapter 2 traces the party's long journey through the 1960s. This period is crucial for the emergence and consolidation of the identity of the PR – notably along the lines of

laicism in its double espousal of anti-clericalism and anti-communism – and for its major awareness of how to act in society. This can be seen, for example, in the role of the Partito Radicale in 1968, when the radicals decided to dismiss ‘the temptation to turn to far-left movements’ (p. 155).

Chapter 3 charts the transformation that the party underwent in the 1970s, when it became a civil rights party. This is perhaps the most compelling and meaningful section of the work. Bonfreschi provides here a meticulous reconstruction of the party’s evolution towards its primary function as a defender of civil rights, especially in the aftermath of the campaign in support of divorce and abortion. She reasonably highlights four main elements of PR actions in the 1970s: the search for an alternative to the ‘paleo fascist demon’ (i.e., Christian Democracy); the use of new mass communication tools, such as radios, and political institutions, such as referenda; an ambiguous attitude toward terrorism, despite the repeated claim for non-violence; and the exponential growth of internal conflicts between local and central leaderships. These aspects, often in contradiction with each other, are evidence of the unconventional and idiosyncratic story of the Partito Radicale, which tirelessly pursued liberal progress and social justice by breaking down the boundaries, limitations and constraints of Cold War politics.

Chapter 4 investigates the story of the radicals in the 1980s. Above all, their attempt to overcome political disengagement resulted in a downgrading of the referendum as a tool to engage the masses. The party, Bonfreschi explains, fostered new themes like environmentalism and Europeanism to win new support within and outside Italy. However, the latter proved impossible, and the Partito Radicale ended up becoming a transnational trans-party and celebrating its XXXV Congress outside the country, in Budapest.

Scholars, in Italian and English, have never dealt in detail with the intriguing history of the Partito Radicale. Bonfreschi fills the gap excellently, engaging with the hidden sides of the story, including the problematic choices of the leadership which engendered deep internal conflicts. As such, the book is an indispensable contribution to contemporary Italian history: it offers an insightful reflection on a political actor that, despite its limited electoral size, contributed significantly to the modernisation of the country.

*Un’idea di libertà* deploys a variety of sources, from primary ones such as the public speeches of leaders, to secondary, such as Teodori, Ignazi, and Panebianco’s book *I nuovi radicali. Storia e sociologia di un movimento politico*. The prose is well-structured, although it sometimes loses pace, becoming unnecessarily complicated, especially for non-academic readers. The author adopts the traditional structural and institutional approach to political history, which undoubtedly allows her to offer a complete monograph on the second Partito Radicale and its culture, activities, and role in the political and social scenarios from its origins until 1988. However, this approach arguably underplays the feelings, deeds, and actions of the militants of the Partito Radicale, who are often mentioned but remain regrettably voiceless. Personal narratives and oral sources would have served this purpose, thus enriching the historical narrative. In addition, the history of the PR comes across as a standalone subject, whereas significant attention to the national and international context would have served the readers much more effectively. Nevertheless, Bonfreschi’s extensive and lucid work will be an indispensable reference point for the historiography of Italian political history, blazing the trail for further research on how the seeds sown by the radicals affected the culture of Italy’s centre-left politics after 1989.