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From Dream to Nightmare? The Roots of Fear amongst the Italian Middle Class

Gianni Silei

Sicché quando gli dissero che era tempo di lasciare la sua roba, per pensare all'anima, uscì nel cortile come un pazzo, barcollando, e andava ammazzando a colpi di bastone le sue anitre e i suoi tacchini, e strillava:
— Roba mia, vientene con me!

Giovanni Verga, *La Roba* (1883)

A crisis that comes from afar

IN 2004, JUST BEFORE THE FINANCIAL CRISIS PROVOKED A RECESSION ON A GLOBAL SCALE, Valerio Castronovo published a short study focussed on economic ailments and the stalled development of the Italian economy. Those he called the ‘anxieties of the middle class’ represented the core element of his analysis.¹

The subsequent developments have further confirmed this disorientation, which in the following years has contributed to causing disruptive effects in terms of domestic political balance. John Foot recently pointed out, ‘a sense of crisis and transformation’ represents a sort of common thread in Italian history, but there is little sign that this sense of insecurity, which affects many social strata but is particularly present in the middle class, is easing up.²

Although some of the causes behind this sentiment are peculiar to the Italian case, it should be emphasized that this collective feeling does not represent an exception: many of the fears of the Italian middle class are common to those of the same social actors in Europe. Nevertheless, they are not exclusively linked to the crisis and recession that broke out at the beginning of the new millennium.³

As in other previous moments of crisis and social change, this particular context has determined — in the words of Jean Delumeau — a sort of ‘procession of fears’, triggering

¹ Valerio Castronovo, *Le paure degli italiani* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2004).

² See John Foot, *The Archipelago: Italy since 1945* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), pp. 410–13.

³ See Gianni Silei, *Le radici dell'incertezza: storia della paura tra Otto e Novecento* (Manduria: Lacaita, 2008) and Silei, *I fantasmi della Golden Age: paura e incertezza nell'immaginario collettivo dell'Europa occidentale (1945-1975)* (Milan: Franco Angeli, forthcoming).

collective hysteria and moral panic.⁴ The list of this ‘multitude of fears, disaffection and pessimism’ is long: ‘fear of losing one’s job; fear of ‘strangers’ (i.e., migrants), fear of losing national autonomy; fear of losing old traditions and values; fear of climate change; disappointment and even disgust with mainstream politics and corruption; anger about the growing gap between rich and poor; disaffection to the lack of transparency of political decision making and so forth.’⁵ These feelings have largely been the basis of the rise of many right-wing populisms in Italy as in the rest of Europe. All this seems to have confirmed one of the key problems of the advanced societies that Jacques Attali had foretold some years ago: the middle class, the main actor of the developed market democracy, is living in a world in which, as in its worst nightmares, it has to cope with the precarious condition from which it thought it had escaped.⁶

The ‘end of certainties,’ to cite Ilya Prigogine,⁷ is actually one of the main characteristics of the postmodern condition; it is the fruit of the transformation process and of the crisis that has hit the pillars on which the Western society was founded since the second post-war years: the Fordist production system, state interventionism, the welfare state and the other values, ideologies and forms of representation that contributed to shaping the so-called affluent society. The crumbling of a model of society that had reached its apogee in the 1970s has opened a season of uncertainty whose effects are still ongoing.⁸ At the centre of this storm is the social actor who most benefited from the virtuous effects of the golden age: the middle class.

The middle class is a social actor that is traditionally extremely difficult to define: at the end of the 1920s, Benedetto Croce spoke of it as ‘an ambiguous historical concept’. Later, Ralf Dahrendorf described it as a ‘group that is not a group, [a] class that is not a class, [a] social stratum that is not a social stratum’.⁹ The middle class is actually constituted, especially in Italy, by different groups and categories whose boundaries and composition change over time, not only on professional criteria but also on culture, lifestyles and perception and sense of belonging.¹⁰ From this point of view, the Italian

⁴ Jean Delumeau, ‘Una storia della paura’ in *Le rivoluzioni del benessere*, ed. by Piero Melograni and Sergio Ricossa (Rome: Laterza, 1988), pp. 190–91. See also Stephen Hilgartner and Charles L. Bosk, ‘The Rise and Fall of Social Problems: A Public Arenas Model’, *The American Journal of Sociology*, 94, no. 1 (1988), 53–78.

⁵ Ruth Wodak, *The Politics of Fear: What Right-Wing Populist Discourses Mean* (London: Sage, 2015), p. 3.

⁶ Jacques Attali, *Breve storia del futuro* (Rome: Fazi, 2007), p. 148.

⁷ Ilya Prigogine, *La fine delle certezze: il tempo, il caos e le leggi della natura* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1997).

⁸ See Simona Colarizi, *Novecento d’Europa: l’illusione, l’odio, la speranza, l’incertezza* (Rome: Laterza, 2015), pp. 441–72.

⁹ Benedetto Croce, ‘Di un equivoco concetto storico: la borghesia’, *La Critica: rivista di letteratura, storia e filosofia*, 26 (1928), 261–74; Ralf Dahrendorf, *Classi e conflitto di classe nella società industriale* (Bari: Laterza, 1970), p. 101.

¹⁰ Arnaldo Bagnasco, ‘La questione del ceto medio in epoca di crisi’, in *La costruzione del ceto medio: immagini sulla stampa e in politica*, ed. by Rocco Sciarrone and others (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2011), pp. 7–10. See also Arnaldo Bagnasco, ‘Introduzione a una questione complicata’, in *Ceto medio. Perché e come occuparsene. Una*

categories *ceto medio/ceti medi*, *classe media/classi medie* are considered here with this general meaning and translated with the term *middle class*.

The subject of this contribution is to put forward some general reflections on the possible origins of fears and the sense of uncertainty of the Italian middle class and its interpretations. As we will see, even if the malaise is a recent phenomenon, its roots are much more distant in time. It actually emerged in the 1990s, when the ephemeral effects of the ‘flawed’ second economic miracle ended and Italy experienced a new (and more disruptive) systemic crisis. Starting from the 1980s, this analysis will therefore be focussed on that decade. The goal is not to provide answers but to pose some preliminary remarks that deserve to be addressed and discussed by historians. A historicization of this phenomenon can in fact contribute not only to a better understanding of the current framework but also to grasp its dynamics and its possible developments, especially in political terms.

The ‘old’ and the ‘new’ middle class: apogee and crisis

During the immediate second post-war period, the Italian middle class experienced a phase of upsurge that preceded and followed the huge revolution in consumption determined by the economic miracle.¹¹ New social subjects joined the traditional sectors of the bourgeoisie and the middle class in a context of strong upward social mobility. According to some interpretations, this expansion was also a consequence of the peculiar character of ‘protected democracy’ (the Italian political system was blocked by the *conventio ad excludendum* pact against the Communist party) that the country had assumed since May 1947, namely by the exclusion of the social-communist left from the government. The rise of the white-collar people was accompanied — as Silvio Lanaro pointed out — by the creation of an ‘artificial middle class’ that responded to a precise plan of political, social and economic stabilization that had been pursued since the political season of centrism.¹² This phenomenon, which had one of its main examples in the Coldiretti farmers’ organization, is important as it is not directly linked to the industrialisation process but precedes the very beginning of the economic boom of 1958–1963.

ricerca del Consiglio italiano per le scienze sociali, ed. by Arnaldo Bagnasco and others (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2008), pp. 17–74, and Carlo Carboni, ‘Tra ceto e classe’, in *I ceti medi in Italia tra sviluppo e crisi*, ed. by Carlo Carboni (Rome: Laterza, 1981), pp. 3–58.

¹¹ *La rivoluzione dei consumi: società di massa e benessere in Europa, 1945–2000*, ed. by Stefano Cavazza and Emanuela Scarpellini (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2010).

¹² Silvio Lanaro, *Storia dell’Italia repubblicana: l’economia, la politica, la cultura, la società dal dopoguerra agli anni ’90* (Venice: Marsilio, 1992), p. 293. See also Pietro Scoppola, *La Repubblica dei partiti: profilo storico della democrazia in Italia (1945-1990)* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1991), pp. 197–207.

Confirming the gradual nature of this process, there is a sort of co-presence within the composition of the middle classes of something 'new' next to something more 'ancient' – a characteristic that was highlighted in the early 1970s by Paolo Sylos Labini.¹³ Supported by quantitative data, his research also underlined how the rise of new social sectors, mainly composed of a large white-collar and partly commercial middle class, had been made possible thanks to the rapid expansion of private and public bureaucracy. This expansion led to a reduction in the gap between salaries and wages, with the consequence of bringing closer the respective material conditions between the lower strata of the middle class and the working class. More importantly, this had taken place 'upwards,' that is, in a context of a generalised improvement in the standard of living. In describing the features of the new, emerging middle class, Sylos Labini reaffirmed its fragmentation and instability:

The middle class is not really a class; one can speak, at most, of a quasi-class, which possesses some basic solidarity (for economic and cultural reasons), but which is divided into many and many groups, with different and often conflicting economic interests, with different types of culture and with different levels of what could be called civil morality [*moralità civile*].¹⁴

The perverse dynamics of these new subjects, which he said represented the true fulcrum of the Italian modernisation, emerged from a comparison, albeit based on rough estimates, of the social composition over the years. In this respect, the change, closely related to the process of industrialisation that took place during the years of reconstruction and the economic boom, was more qualitative than quantitative. After having reached 56.9% of the population in the early 1950s, the middle class suffered a slight decline (counterbalanced at the top by a slight increase in the bourgeoisie and below by an increase in the working class), reaching 49.6% in 1971. More in detail, to the decisive increase of the white-collars, which rose from 5% in 1936 to 17.1% in 1971, there was a reduction in the petty self-employed bourgeoisie which, in the same time period, fell from 47.1% to 29.1%.

When, in the mid-1980s, Sylos Labini returned to deal with the issue of social classes, the great gentrification process (*grande imborghesimento*) was about to reach its climax. The country had been hit by 'several great economic and social changes' that had radically changed its social stratification. Compared to 1881, the employed in agriculture had fallen by 45%, those in industry and craft sector (after reaching their peak in 1971) by 5%. The most relevant data concerned employees in the tertiary sector (up 27.5%) and public administration (+ 12%). 'On the whole,' he noted, 'it is the enormous growth of the middle class that dominates the picture of social transformations in Italy.'¹⁵ This process reached its peak in the second half of the 1990s, when Italy, like other European

¹³ Paolo Sylos Labini, *Saggio sulle classi sociali* (Rome: Laterza, 1974).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Paolo Sylos Labini, *Le classi sociali negli anni '80* (Rome: Laterza, 1986), p. 28.

countries such as the United Kingdom, seemed to have become a ‘classless society’, composed of a middle class, numerically, politically and culturally hegemonic.¹⁶

This process was accompanied by a sort of individualistic mutation (which Pier Paolo Pasolini, observing its first manifestations, defined as ‘anthropological’), at the end of which the new middle class developed a common identity that went beyond the mere question of income (which on the contrary remained so diversified as to be compared by some observers to ‘a real jungle’).¹⁷ In this season of rediscovered optimism, often referred to as the *riflusso* (the reflux), opposed to the season of the collective movements and social mobilisation of the 1960s and to the sombre 1970s characterized by recession and terrorism, the modernisation started with the economic miracle seeming to have been completed. The aggregation process continued, and the middle class, until then ‘hidden’ and in many ways on the margins of political debate and social analysis (mainly concentrated on the working class), reached its apogee.

The economic indicators, further accentuated by the success of the ‘Made in Italy’ brand, seemed to confirm this picture of renewed optimism. In 1985, the Italian prime minister, the socialist Bettino Craxi (one of the icons of this decade), cited the title of Federico Fellini’s film distributed two years before (*E la nave va, And the Ship Sails On*) to underline these impressive achievements. Exactly as for the Reaganomics and Thatcherism, behind the glossy image of the country of fashion shows, big brands and accessible luxury, these were actually years in *chiaroscuro*. In February 1988, at the height of this phase, the *Economist*, analysing the Italian case, published an article titled *The Flawed Renaissance* pointing out that this new Italian miracle was, in fact, flawed.¹⁸

Although the economic indicators appeared to be growing, the public debt and public expenditure were growing exponentially, much more than in the rest of Europe. The same economic ‘overtaking’ of Italy on the British economy, which had been celebrated by the *pentapartito* government as an extraordinary achievement and had generated further euphoria, had been accomplished without taking into account the persistence of many structural negative elements. On closer inspection, this boom had been the result of the take off of the industrial districts located especially in Lombardy and in the North East. Large industries, however, were in great difficulty. In those same years, in fact, the industrial sector lost more than a million jobs. The development of the tertiary sector and its social consequences (*terziarizzazione*) could only partially counterbalance the

¹⁶ See for instance Alwyn W. Turner, *A Classless Society: Britain in the 1990s* (London: Aurum, 2013).

¹⁷ Ermanno Gorrieri, *La giungla retributiva* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1972). See also Giovanni Gozzini, *La mutazione individualista: gli italiani e la televisione, 1954-2011* (Rome: Laterza, 2011). On the ‘new’ middle class identity see Arnaldo Bagnasco, ‘Società del rischio e questione del ceto medio: la centralità di un programma di ricerche’, *Queste istituzioni*, no. 153 (2009), 42-47 (p. 46).

¹⁸ ‘The Flawed Renaissance: A Survey of the Italian Economy’, *The Economist*, 27 February/4 March 1988.

impact of the de-industrialisation process.¹⁹ The social costs of this change were all managed through public spending (lay-off schemes for employees, unemployment benefits, early retirement incentives and so on). Moreover, a closer look revealed that the miracle had been inflated, not only from public funding but also from the continuous devaluation of the Italian currency, which allowed the internal products to maintain their competitiveness in the international arena.

The picture was therefore idyllic but only in appearance. Right at the end of that decade, the condition of the middle class began to waver. The many unresolved contradictions, the profound transformations that took place in the organisation of production and in the labour market, and the coming of the 'flexible capitalism', culminating in the last decade of the 20th century with the exponential increase of atypical contracts, caused a progressive increase in inequality in Italy and in other countries with a post-industrial economy. Called into question, in the name of a return to the market and to individual initiative, the redistributive mechanisms, already in crisis due to the effects of the crisis of the 1970s, stopped representing a safety net against social downgrading. The first to be negatively affected were the excluded and the 'new service proletariat', but the backlash was also felt by the middle class.²⁰

As had happened in America, the history of the new Italian middle class, which had begun 'with a mood of generosity and optimism', ended 'with cynicism and narrowing self-interest'.²¹ The season of growth and profound transformations, culminating in the affluent society, ended with a degraded *terziarizzazione* and a 'conspicuous waste' (*sciupio vistoso*) prelude to the uncertainties of the 'liquid society'. Despite the many premonitory signs, the middle class in Italy, even more markedly than in other countries, seemed to have forgotten its main characterising factor. The middle class was (and still is today) a 'community of destiny': the individual advantages and disadvantages tend to be transmitted to subsequent generations. This virtuous mechanism would have jammed between the 1990s and the early years of the new millennium.

¹⁹ See Giuseppe De Rita, 'Composizione sociale e borghesia: un'evoluzione non parallela', in Aldo Bonomi, Massimo Cacciari and Giuseppe De Rita, *Che fine ha fatto la borghesia? Dialogo sulla nuova classe dirigente in Italia* (Turin: Einaudi, 2004), pp. 40-43.

²⁰ See Massimo Paci, *La mobilità sociale in Italia* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1994).

²¹ Barbara Ehrenreich, *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class* (New York: HaperCollins, 1989), p. 3.

A crucial decade: the 1990s

According to some social scientists, at the beginning of the 1990s, the structure of Italian society 'had assumed the connotation of a 'great pear' i.e., it was composed of a numerous and indistinct middle class, 'increasingly affluent in absolute terms', but at the same time, it was 'increasingly crushed towards medium-low levels in terms of relative differences'.²² Composing this variegated panorama were the numerous categories of the traditional middle class: owners of shops, warehouses or commercial structures, and craft enterprise owners, renters and small landowners, employees, intermediate managers and traditional or dependent professionals. This plethora of subjects was already facing the first difficulties due to the effects of economic and social transformations. Moreover, as a consequence of the gentrification process (*cetomedizzazione*) of the 1980s, new categories had emerged: the small and medium technological entrepreneurs and those of the so-called 'Third Italy', professionals and technicians, creative intellectuals, employees in professional and bureaucratic organisations.²³ Unlike the past, many of these new middle-class members were mainly employees. This characteristic would have been further accentuated in the following years, when despite the emergence of a strong market culture and the ideological emphasis placed on the figure of the successful entrepreneur (as a consequence of the rise of Silvio Berlusconi), the process of de-industrialisation would have made small businesses and self-employed people among its first victims.²⁴

Until that moment, the country had experienced a phase of generalised attenuation of inequalities: since the years of reconstruction, the economic gap and social gap had fallen steadily. For thirty years, the average individual income had grown with a consequent attenuation of the gap between wages and salaries. In the 1980s, however, the first signs of a partial change of route had emerged. The social divide continued to decrease thanks to the positive effects of the welfare state, which in Italy reached its final conclusion only at the end of the 1970s with the creation of the National Health System. On the contrary, the domestic economy returned to show dangerous signs of crisis both for the re-emergence of unemployment and the persistence of the North-South divide, only partially filled with the growth of previous years.²⁵ This trend continued in the following years; combined with other factors (above all, a high level of public spending and an

²² De Rita, 'Composizione sociale e borghesia', pp. 40–43.

²³ Arnaldo Bagnasco, *Le tre Italie* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1977). See also Gian Paolo Prandstraller, *La rinascita del ceto medio* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2013).

²⁴ *Le dimensioni della disuguaglianza: rapporto Fondazione Cespe sulla disuguaglianza sociale in Italia*, ed. by Massimo Paci (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1993).

²⁵ See Sylos Labini, *Le classi sociali negli anni '80*, pp. 31–39. For a general overview of social protection policies in the 1970s and 1980s, see Gianni Silei, 'Espansione e crisi: le politiche di welfare in Italia tra gli anni Settanta e Ottanta', in *Momenti del welfare in Italia: storiografia e percorsi di ricerca*, ed. by Paolo Mattered (Rome: Viella, 2012), pp. 121–56.

increase in taxation), it caused a crisis that in the first instance affected the lower strata of the middle class.

During the 1990s, the issue of the decline of the middle classes became one of the main topics of discussion. A first turning point was represented by the *Tangentopoli* scandal. With the end of the Cold War, the Italian political system, no longer blocked by the East–West confrontation, collapsed. The political crisis was thus added to an economic crisis that was a direct consequence of the many unsolved problems in the country. This context of renewed uncertainty – derived from the loss of political reference points, pervaded by a strong sense of decline and further strengthened by the economic sacrifices required by the process of European integration – started a debate on the future of the country and its main social actors. In August 1992, Giuseppe De Rita provided a still substantially optimistic interpretation of the situation. Italy appeared to him ‘disoriented and in the grip of two fears and two angers: the fear and anger of those who believe they lose identity if they do not immediately reach new dimensions and conceptions of themselves; and the fear and anger of those who see in the processes underway the dangers of marginalization and new poverty.’ In spite of this, Italy remained in his opinion ‘vital’ and relatively confident in the future.²⁶ Soon, this cautious optimism vanished. The debate proceeded, reaching its first peak in the middle of that decade. More than the economic issue (the main negative effects emerged only at the beginning of the 2000s), the malaise of the middle class remained mainly of a political and economic nature. The middle class, in particular the sectors of the small business, which had looked at *Mani pulite* investigations with hope, remained, as highlighted by Arnaldo Bagnasco in *La Repubblica*, an ‘archipelago in search of representation’: they had ‘a desperate need for good politics’, and they were disoriented because they had discovered ‘suddenly and confusedly’ that their real problems had not been understood and that their interests had no political representation.²⁷ The policies imposed by the Maastricht treaty were a further factor of discontent and uncertainty. It was at this stage that the issue of impoverishment emerged, materialising the fears of a socially downgraded middle class.²⁸

Faced with mounting protests against austerity policies, Eugenio Scalfari expressed his concern about what could be the possible outlets for this malaise, which affected a society that was divided (Berlusconi’s centre-right on one side and the centre-left coalition led by Romano Prodi on the other side) but still seemed composed of a single, large social bloc, a ‘backbone [...] dominated by the tertiary activities and by the classes that manage them, employees, technicians, self-employed workers, professionals, small

²⁶ Giuseppe De Rita, ‘Ma l’Italia arrabbiata per le tangenti è una società vitale che cerca identità’, *Corriere della sera*, 31 August 1992, p. 15.

²⁷ Arnaldo Bagnasco, ‘Un arcipelago in cerca di rappresentanza’, *Repubblica*, 16 settembre 1996.

²⁸ Dario Di Vico, ‘I colletti bianchi? Ora li fanno neri’, *Corriere della sera*, 7 ottobre 1996.

and medium-sized entrepreneurs.’ He asked, ‘What will the famous middle class do?’²⁹ The ‘declinations of malaise’ provided by the media, which played a crucial role in the social construction of fears of the middle class, were mainly focused around some key themes: exploitation/impoverishment, loss of status, uncertainty of the future, extinction.³⁰ It was around this narrative that the debate would then develop in the following months and years.

In the second half of the 1990s, the issue was already present and framed in its main lines of interpretation. The debate would resume at the beginning of the 2000s when the question of the decline and impoverishment of a middle class, threatened by a growing precariousness and social polarization, became a topic of discussion throughout the West. The progressive sliding of American families towards the ‘risk society’, described by Jacob Hacker in a 2006 study,³¹ would soon find a dramatic and extraordinary multiplier factor in the subprime mortgage crisis and in the housing bubble. The American crisis triggered a tidal wave destined to cross the ocean, severely hitting the finance and the economy of the old continent with heavy social consequences.³²

Conclusion

The current malaise of the middle class in Italy is much more articulate and elusive than many media representations would suggest. Its origins can be traced back to the watershed that divided the so-called ‘Glorious Thirties’ and the ‘Pitiful Thirties’.³³ However, the rise of the ‘society of doubt’ did not happen in one day. Although the 1980s, seen as the season of progressive conversion to neoliberalism and policies based on the winner-take-all philosophy,³⁴ represent an important turning point, the current situation is the consequence of several factors. The anxiety of the Italian middle class is the result of conjunctural situations and of ‘long-term processes, of a concatenation of causes of different nature, endogenous and exogenous, which have followed one another during the years’. The Italian middle class is ‘a crisis that comes from afar,’ similar to

²⁹ Eugenio Scalfari, ‘Le due Italie in campo’, *Repubblica*, 10 Novembre 1996.

³⁰ Antonella Meo, ‘Rappresentazioni della questione: malessere e vulnerabilità’, in Rocco Sciarrone and others, *La costruzione del ceto medio: immagini sulla stampa e in politica* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2011), pp. 166–89.

³¹ Jacob Hacker, *The Great Risk Shift: The New Economic Insecurity and the Decline of the American Dream* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

³² Valerio Castronovo, *Le ombre lunghe del ‘900: perché la storia non è finita* (Milan: Mondadori, 2010), p. 237.

³³ See Jean Fourastié, *Les trente glorieuses; ou, La révolution invisible de 1946 à 1975* (Paris: Fayard, 1979) and Nicolas Baverez, *Les trente piteuses* (Paris: Flammarion, 1998).

³⁴ Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson, *Winner-Take-All Politics: How Washington Made the Rich Richer—and Turned Its Back on the Middle Class* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010).

those that pervade western middle class as a whole, to which, however, to complicate the picture, must be added some ‘specific aggravating factors.’³⁵

Since the 1980s, and to an even greater extent during the *Berlusconismo*, large sectors of the ‘new’ middle class embraced the historic aversion that the bourgeoisie had nurtured in the past *vis-à-vis* the State, forgetting that what had favoured their rise had been a ‘protected individualism’ fuelled ‘by public spending’.³⁶ The advent of the middle-class society, with the homogenisation of consumption and lifestyles, had another consequence. This process determined a flattening of the society with negative repercussions on the formation process of the ruling class, and more generally, it contributed to triggering those perverse cultural and moral mechanisms that accentuated the effects of the crisis.³⁷ On the verge of the 2008 crisis, the risks Sylos Labini had warned the country of in the mid-1980s had become reality.³⁸ In search of the causes of the ‘avalanche’ that seemed to have swept away the First Republic, those interpretations that emphasized the psychocultural regression of the country and all the other degenerative elements that had accompanied the debate during the economic miracle re-emerged.³⁹

The impact of the crisis in the second half of the 2000s simply accentuated a sense of disorientation that was already present. In this, a central role was played by the media that through the use of the so-called ‘Hello Magazine effect’, increased in the public opinion the impression of a much more marked accentuation of inequalities.⁴⁰ The malaise of the middle class returned to be declined adopting those specific interpretative categories (the impoverishment, the loss of status, the increase of uncertainty towards the future up to the risk of extinction) that had already been used in the previous decade. It is therefore no coincidence that, when in 2007, the Eurobarometer dealt with the perception of poverty among European citizens, excluding those of the countries of the former Soviet bloc (Hungary in particular), the Italians were the most worried.⁴¹ The increasingly populist character of the political discourse, in the context of a renewed crisis between the forces that had opposed each other during the first decade of the 2000s, which resulted in the so-called Third Republic, instead of calming social fears, further accentuated them.

³⁵ Castronovo, *Le paure degli italiani*, pp. 8–9, 17. See also Guido Crainz, *Il paese mancato: dal miracolo economico agli anni ottanta* (Rome: Donzelli, 2003).

³⁶ Rudy Koshar, *Splintered Classes: Politics and the Lower Middle Classes in Interwar Europe* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1990).

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 41. See also Massimo Cacciari, ‘Passato futuro del “borghese”’, in Bonomi, *Che fine ha fatto la borghesia?*, pp. 3–32.

³⁸ Sylos Labini, *Le classi sociali negli anni '80*, p. 28.

³⁹ Carlo Donolo, *Italia sperduta: la sindrome del declino e le chiavi per uscirne* (Rome: Donzelli, 2011), pp. 15–16.

⁴⁰ OECD, *Growing Unequal?: Income Distribution and Poverty in OECD Countries* (Paris: OECD, 2008), p. 15.

⁴¹ *European Social Reality*, Eurobarometer Special Report, 273 (Brussels: European Commission, 2007).

Despite the erosion process of recent years, the middle class still represents the cornerstone of the most advanced societies. However, at the same time, as in the past, it remains the restless social subject *par excellence*. Faced with the crisis of traditional political organisations, its vote oscillation and the apparent disavowing of politics further accentuate the atmosphere of uncertainty. Gaining the consent and confidence of the middle class remains the primary objective of politicians of every latitude. Given this pathological insecurity, in times like these, when the social divide has re-emerged because of social polarisation, the problem for the ruling class is to find the right answers to the crisis and, at the same time, to reassure and protect these restless social groups.

During the golden age, this important function had been mainly carried out by the welfare state. As Tony Judt pointed out, post-war welfare states represented a 'barrier against the return of the past: against economic depression and its polarizing, violent political outcome in the desperate politics of Fascism and Communism alike'. In this sense, they were thus 'prophylactic' states, consciously conceived to satisfy the general desire for security and stability.⁴² The crisis of social protection systems has made European societies more vulnerable, increasing their downgrading risks and making their upward mobility more difficult. It is true that the greatest and most devastating consequences of this process have concerned the weakest and least protected social strata, and it is equally true that, despite the very serious situation in which it finds itself, the Italian middle class has shown an unsuspected degree of resilience. However, its discomfort, beyond misperceptions and some media exaggerations, is real, as is the risk of its conditions worsening. In the mid-1980s, at the height of the success of neoliberalism and of the 'anti-welfarist offensive', Peter Glotz warned the European ruling class, especially social democrats, from the risks of an imminent social split that could have heightened inequalities and social exclusion.⁴³ Beyond outdated formulas, in the current economic and social scenarios, the solution to the sense of insecurity of the middle class and to its loss of status is perhaps to fill its need for security in a broad sense. Given the current trends, there are real risks that the share of those who are excluded will increase by continuing to incorporate growing portions of what was once the 'glorious' middle class. At the same time, there is a danger that right-wing political discourse will achieve further success, gaining more support among the middle class by leveraging its atavistic fear of falling.

⁴² Tony Judt, *Reappraisals: Reflections on the Forgotten Twentieth Century* (London: Penguin, 2008), p. 10.

⁴³ Peter Glotz, *La socialdemocrazia tedesca a una svolta: nuove idee-forza per la sinistra in Europa* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1985), pp. 7–8.

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ROME—~~PERCY LORAIN~~ (ABOVE), ENGLAND'S AMBASSADOR TO
ITALY, AND HIS STAFF WERE REPORTEDLY PREPARING TO LEAVE ROME
TO LEAVE ROME FOR RETURN TO ENGLAND. OBSERVERS
INTERPRETED THESE PREPARATIONS AS A SIGN THAT ITALIAN
ENTRY INTO EUROPE'S WAR WAS APPARENTLY CLOSE AT HAND.
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