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Italy's radical left and Catholics

John L. Allen Jr. | Jun. 23, 2006 All Things Catholic

Anyone who has followed American politics in recent years knows the revolution that has taken place in the "religious vote." Once the Democrats were the party of immigrant Catholics, and the Republicans the party of the Protestant establishment; today the Democrats tend to be the party of secularism, and Republicans the party of voters for whom religion is a major concern.

Now a provocative article by Italian political scientist Ernesto Galli della Loggia suggests there is a parallel phenomenon in Italy, which he calls the "death of *cattocommunismo*," the term for the Catholic version of leftist radicalism which was long a potent force in Italian politics.

First, Galli della Loggia argues that the great political debate which created the ground for *cattocommunismo* in the first place, the struggle between capital and labor, is no longer the defining issue. Look, he says, at the actual problems we face: competition with new global actors such as China and India, migratory flows, the demographic crisis of Europe, the impossibility of sustaining current levels of social spending, and the decline in the stability of work. Which of these problems, he asks, is born of a conflict between capital and labor?

His answer is "none."

Further, he argues, in Europe these days economic policy is largely set in Brussels by the European Union, and even the most radical "reformed communists" in Italy and elsewhere have to accept it.

Second, Galli della Loggia says that the traditional social base of the radical left -- industrial workers, farmers, and rural craftsmen -- are today on the verge of disappearing, and have been replaced by civil servants, teachers, employees of large corporations, university professors, and other members of the middle and upper-middle classes. These groups are economically interested in the protection of a strong public sector, but no longer conserve anything of the antique leftist hostility to individualism, hedonism, materialism, and in general for the middle class. Today, the ethic of the left tends to be "to each his or her own," requiring the state to remain neutral in the face of various lifestyle choices.

All this means, according to Galli della Loggia, that the magnetic appeal of *cattocommunismo* in the early 20th century, that of a meeting between "two peoples" in defense of social solidarity and the "humble Italy," against the Italy of the *signori* and the bourgeoisie, is largely finished. Instead, the radical left and Catholics find themselves on opposite sides of the culture wars. The left supports a "subjectivist" ethics, while Catholics defend the values of human life and traditional visions of the family.

Of course, some of his language is a bit loaded, and things are inevitably more complicated than Galli della Loggia's brief sketch may suggest.

Yet Galli della Loggia is nevertheless on to something. The rise of debates over sexuality and the family, rather than economics and international policy, has indeed tended to drive religiously serious voters to the right. Whether this is an inevitable long-term trend, or a process capable of being reversed, may have a lot to say about the future of Western politics.

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