Observer Review: Italy And Its Discontents By Paul Ginsborg Essay, Research Paper

Mob rule and dirty moneyThe events of 1992-93 lie at the heart of Paul Ginsborg’s new history of Italy in the past two decades. And the legacy of those tumultuous years is still the central theme in the peninsula’s politics today. Silvio Berlusconi, landslide victor in last May’s elections, is busily trying to sell his version of recent history to Italian, and European, public opinion. Whereas Ginsborg, a British historian whose clear, accessible analyses of Italy have earned him a chair at the University of Florence, has become so concerned as to form a ‘League for the defence of Italian democracy’. In February 1992, a Socialist Party politician was collared by police in Milan as he tried desperately to flush bribe money down the lavatory. Using his confessions, magistrates began to unravel a system of corruption linking businessmen, politicians and civil servants at the highest levels. At one point the following year, one-third of the nation’s MPs were under scrutiny in what were called the ‘Clean Hands’ investigations. 1992 also saw the Sicilian Mafia spectacularly demonstrate its intention to break the state’s will to resist organised crime. Bombs killed the Mafia’s two biggest enemies – supposedly the best-protected men in Italy – judges Falcone and Borsellino. The following summer, the Mafia geared up its terrorist strategy by placing bombs aimed at members of the public in the city centres of Rome, Florence and Milan. And, on Black Wednesday, 16 September 1992, the lira joined sterling’s plunge out of the European exchange rate mechanism, a huge crisis for a then uniformly Europhile nation. These shocks hit a political class that had never commanded public enthusiasm. The Christian Democrats (DC) had governed without interruption since the Second World War. ‘Hold your nose and vote DC,’ one journalist famously advised. The fall of the Berlin Wall removed the system’s anti-communist prop. Then Umberto Bossi’s raucous, racist Northern League began to win over the self-made families who formed the core of the Christian Democrat vote in economically dynamic Lombardy and the Veneto. Despite this slow undermining of its position, at the start of 1992 the DC still looked to have the allegiance of a good third of Italian voters in its pocket. But by the time of the March 1994 elections, the party had ceased to exist. The same fate befell its chief coalition partner, the Socialists, whose bullish leader, Bettino Craxi, escaped trial by fleeing to Tunisia, where he died in 2000. Active politicians are never good historians. But Berlusconi’s version of the events of 1992-93 at least has the virtue of being easier to summarise than Ginsborg’s: the ‘Clean Hands’ investigations were a coup d’état by a communist-infiltrated magistrature; Socialist leader Craxi was a man surrounded by a ‘fog of resentment and misunderstanding’. (He was also, it should be pointed out, godfather to one of Berlusconi’s children and the man who piloted legislation in favour of the Cavaliere’s TV networks. Craxi’s conviction for taking bribes linked to the extension of the Milan underground was recently confirmed by the European Court of Human Rights – against his lawyers’ claim that he was the victim of a politically motivated plot.) Based on this reading of those pivotal years, Berlusconi has embarked on radical reform of the legal system. His government is making insistent noises about a prosecution against Francesco Saverio Borrelli, the man who led the ‘Clean Hands’ magistrates. The two parties that whooped loudest at the demise of the old political class, the Northern League and the post-Fascists of Alleanza Nazionale, are now junior partners in the Forza Italia coalition. After 1993, the Mafia suffered some heavy blows as an unprecedented number of men of honour turned state’s evidence. That flood has now turned to a trickle. And a new law making it more difficult to use evidence from foreign bank accounts in criminal cases has dulled an incisive weapon against organised crime. Ginsborg cannot hide his disappointment that the revolutionary moment of ‘Clean Hands’ has produced an apparent restoration of this kind. But his account of an era that will come to be defined by the 1992-93 events is nuanced, passionately honest and often riveting. However, Italy and its Discontents is more than the story of the collapse of the first Italian republic and the difficult birth of the second. Ginsborg takes us through Italy’s capillaries (the family) to its furred arteries (the state) taking in what for him are its healthiest organs (civil society). This is a country capable of astonishing entrepreneurial creativity: the small town of Montebelluna in the Veneto has one company for every 10 inhabitants, and produces 90 per cent of the world’s ski boots. But Italy is also a place of exasperating inefficiency. The average length of a criminal case in 1994 was 27 months. In 1993, the owners of car showrooms declared incomes to the tax authorities that were just over half of what was earned by the average member of the sales teams they employed. The list of paradoxes goes on. A country famed for its family centredness has seen its birthrate drop to the lowest on the Continent. In the home of Catholicism, a poll for Sicily’s leading daily paper showed that nearly 90 per cent of Italians disagreed with the Pope’s recent plea that lawyers should conscientiously object to divorce proceedings. Italy and its Discontents is omnicomprehensive historiography. And Ginsborg brings a number of striking features to it. One is his insistent habit of asking the kind of apparently dumb question – ‘What is corruption?’; ‘What does the service sector do?’; ‘What is civil society?’ – that always yields genuine insight. Another is his eye for the brilliantly illustrative anecdote, the telling and sometimes moving first-person quotation. Yet another is his preparedness to measure Italian society in all areas by the yardsticks of justice, efficiency and transparency. Quite whether Berlusconi’s domination of the political scene heralds a ’slow and insidious mutation’ in Italian democracy, as Ginsborg fears, remains to be seen. But if Berlusconi’s fanciful interpretation of his country’s recent history is anything to go by, there is good reason to share Ginsborg’s pessimism.