

Why Italian social democracy needs to be reinterpreted beyond the *clichés* of the post-war period

di SALVATORE BARBAGALLO
Università del Salento
salvatore.barbagallo@unisalento.it

Michele Donno's book, *Sulle tracce della Socialdemocrazia. L'altra storia dei socialisti italiani 1925-1964*¹ is presented as an intentionally counter-current intervention in historiography, designed to reopen a dossier that the author believes has long been hastily closed: that of Italian democratic socialism, the split at Palazzo Barberini and, more generally, the role played by Giuseppe Saragat and the PSLI/PSDI area in the first twenty years of the republic.

The book is explicitly composite in nature: it is not a single monograph written from scratch, but rather a collection of essays published between 2006 and 2024, presented within a unified interpretative framework. Donno does not hide, but rather claims a militant stance in the noble sense of the term: historical reconstruction is called upon to measure itself against a public memory and a historiographical tradition perceived as marked by prejudices and clichés, responsible for a *damnatio memoriae* that would have affected Italian social democrats, transforming them into convenient scapegoats for dynamics far deeper than the post-war political system.

The basic thesis is clearly stated from the outset and is intended to guide the reading of the entire project: the “anomaly” of Italian socialism in 1947-1948 should not be sought in Saragat's decision to split, but rather in the decision of the PSI led by Pietro Nenni to embark on the path of the Popular Front and the close alliance with the PCI and Stalin's Soviet Union. From this perspective, the social democratic split is reinterpreted not as an act of opportunistic division or surrender to the “Western camp”, but as an attempt to realign Italian socialism with a European and democratic model, in tune with French socialists, German social democrats, and British Labour Party, as well as with international networks of democratic socialism. Donno pushes the argument to the point of deliberately peremptory formula, according to which “history has proved them right”: europeanism, atlanticism, reformism, alliance with Catholics, social market economy, and anti-communism – themes long considered marginal or suspect in left-wing political culture – would, in hindsight, prove not only compatible with the socialist tradition, but even anticipatory of a destination that, after many oscillations, even a significant part of the PSI would eventually reach.

From a historiographical point of view, this approach involves a twofold operation. On the one hand, it criticises the “vulgate” that attributed responsibility for the defeat of the Popular Front in 1948 to Saragat's split and, by extension, for the long Christian

¹ M. DONNO, *On the Trail of Social Democracy: The Other History of Italian Socialists 1925-1964*, Pensa Multimedia, Lecce, 2026, pp. 436.

Democratic hegemony and Italy's alignment with the United States. Donno insists on the non-neutral nature of this interpretation: it is not simply an alternative interpretation, but the sedimentation of a political and cultural hostility that, starting with the attacks by the PCI and Nenni's PSI ("traitors", "servants of capitalism", "succubi" of the DC), would produce a lasting marginalisation in public memory and historical elaboration.

On the other hand, the collection aims to reconstruct an "alternative history" of Italian socialists, namely a reformist genealogy that Donno traces back to Turati's political strategy and the splits of 1921-1922, reinterpreted as cultural antecedents of the 1947 choice and as the matrix of a "European-style" democratic socialism that constantly re-emerged, despite defeats and minority status.

The most significant consequence of this approach is that the international dimension does not serve as a backdrop, but rather as a causal structure: the "choice of camp", the acceptance of the Marshall Plan and the firm commitment to European integration are presented as key steps in understanding not only foreign policy options, but also the horizon of economic and social transformation within which the PSLI/PSDI intended to place Italian reconstruction and modernisation. On this point, the reflection offers a reconstruction that deserves attention because it avoids "ideological" simplification (American aid equals liberalism): Donno emphasises that the government's collaboration with De Gasperi was also motivated by the intention to monitor the use of ERP aid so that it would not be bent to "liberal" policies to the detriment of the less well-off and so that it would instead be included in a "productivist" programming and planning framework, presented as consistent both with the objectives of social justice and with the expectations of the United States itself. This is a significant shift: it moves the interpretative axis from the moralism of labels (servility/independence) to the concreteness of instruments (economic policies, government guidelines, parliamentary mediation), accrediting the Social Democrats as actors who aim to "govern" the transition and not just occupy an identity position in the political space.

The centrality given to two turning points – 1947 and 1962 – constitutes the other decisive architectural choice. Donno defines them as "fundamental historical moments" in which Saragat's party played a leading role, first contributing to overcoming the "communist mortgage" in the context of the nascent Cold War, then to the launch of the centre-left experiment and the stabilisation of a new balance of government with the entry (first indirect, then organic) of the socialists into the area of governmental responsibility. The construction of a symmetry between the two two-year periods (1947-48 and 1962-63) allows the author to support a strong argument: the socialist autonomy claimed by Nenni in the 1960s was not a sudden discovery, but a conclusion that had matured "over fifteen years in the social democratic camp", i.e. in the political culture of the PSLI/PSDI, which acted as a hinge and incubator for a strategy aimed at "removing" the PSI from its alliance with the PCI and bringing it into a Western, reformist framework compatible with collaboration with the DC.

It is here that the collection seems to aspire to something more than mere rehabilitation: to reconstruct a long-term link between ideal choices and institutional results. The emphasis on the role of the Social Democrats in keeping Italy within the camp of liberal democracies in 1948 – with the idea that even the "modest percentage" obtained (7.1%) had a decisive impact on the balance of power, especially in the Senate – serves as an

argument that overturns the current interpretation: numerical minority does not mean historical irrelevance.

In accordance, the narrative of 1962-1964, with the transition from the parliamentary centre-left (Fanfani) to the “organic” centre-left (Moro), culminates in two symbolic moments: the election of Saragat to the Quirinale in 1964 and the reunification of 1966, effectively defined as a “cold fusion” because it was imposed by the central organs and lacked genuine “bottom-up” assimilation, destined in fact to lead to a new break within a few years. In this trajectory, Donno does not eliminate the grey areas: he admits shadows and failures in the government's experience and does not shy away from the issue of the party's subsequent decline after Saragat's departure from direct management, harshly evoked by Tremelloni's own papers (parceling out of power, small local notables, loss of leadership quality). This self-critical element, although part of an overall “enabling” design, contributes to making the book less hagiographic and hints at a more subtle research question: to what extent can the historical function of a political actor be great while its organisational structure and reproduction over time remain fragile?

One interesting aspect is the recognition of the material and organisational difficulties faced by the Social Democrats. Donno emphasises the lack of “iron party discipline” and, above all, the chronic shortage of economic resources, with concrete effects on the ability to spread propaganda and take root among the working and peasant masses, already strongly controlled by the Social Communist bloc. We are not only faced with a conflict of political lines: the author also calls into question the conditions for action, the asymmetrical competition with mass parties with widespread organisations and, in the case of the communists, supported by Soviet funding.

This focus on resources and consensus-building infrastructure, if developed in the essays, can be an important antidote to purely ideological interpretations of the split: choosing sides does not automatically translate into votes, and post-war political history is also the history of organisations, newspapers, local networks, mobilisation capabilities, as well as the psychological and social “stranglehold” produced by international polarisation.

The section dedicated to sources and documentation is equally important and should be considered a true methodological statement. Donno points out the dispersion of the PSLI papers and the absence of a comprehensive archive of Saragat; he therefore identifies the party's periodical press as the source of greatest continuity (with a significant list of newspapers), to be supplemented with minutes of the Council of Ministers, parliamentary acts and, above all, personal archives (Tremelloni, Faravelli, and Schiavi) preserved in various institutions. This transparency is a strength: it informs the reader of the real constraints on the history of democratic socialism and, at the same time, invites critical reflection on the nature of the sources. The party press, by definition, is an intensely “participatory” source, yet in the absence of unified archives, it often becomes indispensable for reconstructing debates, priorities, languages and self-representations. This is where a typical challenge of political party history comes into play: transforming the public discourse produced by the actors into an object of analysis, without taking it as pure “truth” but also without devaluing it as mere propaganda. The author is aware of the problem and attempts to resolve it by proposing a triangulation between biased sources and institutional sources; this is an encouraging premise, not least because it points to a direction of

research – the “international connections” of the Reconstruction – which, by its very nature, requires multiple and comparative documentation.

From an interpretative point of view, the core of Donno’s argument revolves around a concept that we could define as the “democratic guarantee function” of democratic socialism in the post-war period: the 1947 split is presented as a decisive contribution to keeping Italy within the liberal democracies, in a context in which – according to the author – in 1948 there was a real risk of slipping into the Soviet orbit and transforming into a “people’s democracy” based on the Eastern model. This is a passage which, due to its implicit counterfactual force, requires analytical caution: talking about “risk” and “destiny” calls into question the evaluation of historical alternatives, the weight of international factors and the actual ability of domestic actors to influence the outcome. The investigation developed addresses this primarily in terms of context and judgement; for the reader, the outcome of the test will depend on how well the essays manage to support the assumption with documentary evidence, reconstructions of causal links and comparisons with competing interpretations. In other words, the persuasiveness of the volume will depend on its ability to show “how” and “through what mechanisms” a minority party manages to have systemic influence, beyond the assertion – plausible in itself – that in a parliamentary system even non-majority quotas can be decisive at certain junctures.

A controversial memory: *damnatio memoriae* and the problem of sources

In this operation, the concept of *damnatio memoriae* functions not only as a denunciation, but also as an explanatory hypothesis. Donno insists that the cultural and political hostility that had been brewing since 1947 – fuelled, in his view, by the “frantic attacks” of communists and socialists who remained in the PSI – had turned into a lasting filter, capable of influencing even historiographical work. The review here must deal with two levels: on the one hand, it is plausible that political conflict produced antagonistic narratives and that these influenced public memory; on the other hand, the argument risks becoming an all-encompassing explanation, capable of absorbing any interpretative dissent under the category of “prejudice”. The challenge for the volume will therefore be to distinguish precisely between what is truly a “stereotype” (a judgement repeated without documentary verification) and what is instead an alternative interpretation based on other sources or different criteria of relevance.

However, the book does not limit itself to attributing marginalisation to a cultural conspiracy, but also identifies structural reasons that may have made a fully articulated reconstruction of democratic socialism more difficult. The dispersion of the PSLI papers and the absence of a Saragat archive constitute, in this perspective, a material constraint that has favoured simplified readings: if ‘nothing remains as a unified block of the PSLI’s activity’, historiography inevitably tends to depend on fragmentary, often indirect sources. Donno points to the party press and personal archives (Tremelloni, Faravelli, and Schiavi) as well as government minutes and parliamentary records, as the main sources of documentary evidence, emphasising that it was precisely in these archives that it was possible to trace official correspondence and circulars at least until 1952. From a methodological point of view, this step is crucial because it makes it clear to the reader that reconstruction is not just an interpretative exercise, but also a work of re-aggregating

traces, in which the choice of sources inevitably influences the angle of the narrative. This has an ambivalent effect: on the one hand, the investigation increases the reliability of the project, showing awareness of its own limitations; on the other, it implicitly calls for critical caution in the use of the party press, which is a “source of continuity” but also a source of self-legitimation, and therefore needs to be handled with appropriate analytical tools.

It is significant that Donno proposes, among the “defining moments”, first and foremost the “strong proposition” of a critique of the Soviet system conducted from within groups that referred to Marxism, and describes the climate of the Italian left after the war as one marked by dogmatism and cultural intolerance, within which the social democratic struggle would have required “moral resistance”.

This interpretation places Saragat not only as a political leader, but also as the standard-bearer of a specific intellectual sensibility that developed in the 1920s and 1930s, which would have allowed for an early critique of Soviet “real Marxism” and a gradual distancing from “fusionist” socialism. In this regard, it should be noted that within a socialist-inspired orientation with explicit theoretical references to Marxism, there were many doubts about the Bolshevik experience. Togliatti’s calls to bring the most eminent Italian anti-fascist intellectuals into his party, and Corrado Barbagallo’s refusal, made clear to Italo De Feo, to join because his faith in Marxism had little in common with the construction of the regime of real communism in Russia point in this direction.

Here, the perspective is clearly that of political and cultural history: political action is traced back to a formative journey and a set of interpretative categories (freedom/democracy as a discriminating factor, totalitarianism as the inevitable degeneration of Eastern regimes) which the author considers, in hindsight, to have been “confirmed” by events such as the the Hungarian uprising of 1956.

The international context operates on several levels and accompanies the entire periodisation. On the one hand, there are the geopolitical shocks of 1947-49 and the gradual structuring of the Cold War; on the other, there is the idea that the Western position cannot be reduced to strategic alignment, but involves a certain model of development and economic institutions. It is in this context that Donno introduces what he himself defines as probably the “least known” aspect: the PSLI’s action for accession to the Marshall Plan and, above all, for its concrete management, recalling Tremelloni’s role in drafting the four-year plan for the use of ERP aid and in representing Italy at the OEEC.

This is not a minor detail: it serves to support a broader argument, namely that the “choice of sides” made in 1948 should not be seen today as servile opportunism, but rather as a conscious and “courageous” decision, and that the PSLI played a positive role in the “fundamental choices” (Marshall Plan, NATO) that would shape Italy’s future.

In light of this approach, the judgement must recognise its fruitfulness: shifting the analysis from the level of ideological accusations to that of public policies and institutional mechanisms is an effective way of removing the history of the PSLI/PSDI from the moralistic alternative of “betrayal/loyalty”. However, precisely because the work uses strong language (“courageous choice”, “validity” of social democratic analyses that emerged from historical research), the specialist reader can expect a detailed comparison not only with “hostile” historiography, but also with the trade-offs inherent in those choices: what were the political costs of the 1947 split? What real opportunities did

government collaboration offer to guide the use of aid and economic policy? What kind of social consensus was realistically available for a reformist social democracy in an Italy marked by polarisation, poverty and mass mobilisation? In truth, the book already provides some useful elements to avoid overly linear interpretations, because it emphasises the unfavourable balance of power in the executive and the impossibility of achieving programmatic objectives, as well as the reproduction of the same balances even after 18 April 1948.

Paradoxically, it is precisely here that Donno's narrative gains strength: the decision to emphasise social democratic action does not imply denying its operational limitations; on the contrary, the author seems to want to bring the history of the PSLI/PSDI back to the more complex and realistic logic of coalitions and institutional constraints.

1925–1946: reformist genealogies and the international context

Following Donno's line of thought, it is now worth retracing the story along the sequence of historical turning points to which the collection returns with greater insistence, in order to understand how the "other" interpretation of social democracy is constructed step by step.

The author links the profile of the PSLI as a "third force" project and an attempt to establish a "European-style" social democracy to a distant but symbolically powerful precedent: the reformist split of 1922 and Turatism, even referred to in the form of the pro-European prophecy of the "United States of Europe".

This has a clear significance in political genealogy: postwar social democracy is not portrayed as a contingent invention of the Cold War, but as the resurgence of a reformist streak already present in Italian socialist history. In interpretative terms, this choice is effective because it removes Saragat from the image of a pure "splitter" and places him within a long period of time. However, it also carries a risk of excessive continuity: the temptation to interpret 1947 as an inevitable resurgence of 1922, and thus to reduce the postwar period to a simple opportunity to reactivate a reformist destiny. The author mitigates this risk when he describes the impact of the severe economic and social crisis of 1947 and the pressure of international events as factors that fueled internal misunderstandings and choices of sides, emphasizing the plurality of "souls" that converged within the PSLI and the resulting organizational fragility, with "continuous fibrillations" and splits.

In fact, one of the most concrete merits of the research is its focus on the issue of internal plurality and organisational weakness, which prevents the PSLI from being treated as a unified entity. Donno emphasises the lack of "iron party discipline" and reconstructs the presence of factions, including a neutralist left opposed to government collaboration (Mondolfo and Faravelli) that organised itself in opposition to Saragat's leadership after 1948. This internal dynamic is essential to understanding why a project that aspired to dominate the socialist universe failed to translate into mass support. The narrative that emerges from the study is therefore not that of a coherent minority and victim, but rather that of a subject riven by real tensions, under pressure from external constraints and unable to consolidate a stable organisational structure. In this light, social democratic "vulnerability" is not an accident, but a structural dimension of the story: and this

dimension deserves, in this review, to be considered one of the most promising interpretative contributions, because it allows us to read the history of the PSLI/PSDI also as a history of failures and “missed opportunities”, not only as a history of foresight.

The period between 1948 and 1951, as outlined above, appears emblematic of this ambivalence. On the one hand, the author emphasises the “decisive weight” of the 7.1% majority in the Senate; on the other, he acknowledges that this result did not satisfy the Social Democratic leaders, and that insufficient representation and unfavourable power relations prevented PSLI ministers from asserting their positions and achieving their programme objectives, both in the fourth and fifth De Gasperi governments.

This tension between systemic relevance and operational impotence is, in fact, one of the most interesting points for understanding the “paradoxical nature” of Italian social democracy: decisive for the balance of power, but incapable of transforming that decisiveness into organisational expansion or proportionate policy-making capacity. Donno adds that, starting in the second half of 1948, the PSLI developed a denunciation of the “liberalist choice” considered inevitable in 1947, partly because of its inability to make an impact; and that this evolution, intertwined with conflicts and splits, led to the end of its experience in government alongside De Gasperi in 1951.

This reconstruction is significant because it suggests a non-trivial relationship between Western alignment and economic policies: adherence to the Western camp does not automatically equate to adherence to liberalism, and indeed can fuel, within social democratic culture, criticism of government policies when they appear insufficient in terms of social justice and reforms.

The next phase, 1951-1954, is presented as a period of attempts at reunification and further fragmentation. The re-founding of the Socialist International (1951) and the reunification of the PSL and PSU in April of the same year, with the birth of the Socialist Party – Section of the Socialist International, are interpreted as signs of a drive towards unity, immediately contradicted, however, by the difficulty of drawing the masses away from the social-communist front and by the increase in support for the extremes.

It was in this context that Donno decided to clarify the party’s social democratic identity by changing its name (January 1952: PSDI) and, above all, to follow Saragat’s line in favour of closer collaboration with the Christian Democrats and support for the electoral reform project. This option, however, is not presented as a peaceful choice: it led to a further split and the birth of *Unità Popolare*, which in the 1953 elections was decisive in preventing the governing parties from obtaining the majority bonus. Here, the research offers valuable material for review, as it allows us to address a topic that is often discussed in a schematic way: the oscillation of social democracy between collaboration and opposition to the DC. Donno acknowledges that the PSDI went into the 1953 elections severely weakened and that the unsatisfactory results and the confirmation of the balance of power on the left convinced the Social Democrats to abandon their strategy of opposition to the DC once and for all and to resume collaboration with Scelba in 1954.

For an assessment, this oscillation is a decisive test. While Donno calls for “new reflection” on the stable relationship with the “Christian Democrat power system”, the narrative suggests the risk that collaboration may, over time, become a forced choice rather than a freely pursued strategy. The review must therefore focus on a question that the author implicitly raises: was Italian social democracy a “governing” actor out of reformist

conviction and democratic responsibility, or did it end up being a “governing” actor because it lacked competitive space on the left and was unable to become a mass party? Donno, in presenting the PSDI as a “party of opinion” and in recognising that it failed to become either a party of the masses or a party of the middle classes, already provides the basis for a non-triumphalist reading: the political space was “very limited” on both the left and the right. In this light, historical function can coexist with sociological marginality: a combination which, in the Italian case, raises more general questions about the structure of the party system and forms of representation in the post-war period.

The issue of internal weakness is not limited to the question of factions. Donno insists on the “chronic lack of financial resources” as the leitmotif of the leadership of the PSLI and then the PSDI; an element which, together with the strong propaganda and organisational capacity of the large mass parties, would have made social democratic action “very difficult”. This is a point that deserves to be highlighted, because it shifts the discussion to an often overlooked area: that of the material infrastructure of consensus. Parties are not just programmes and leaders, but organisational machines, territorial networks, capable of mobilising, printing, distributing and being present. Including the scarcity of resources as an interpretative variable essentially means suggesting that the social democratic “minority” was also the product of conditions of asymmetrical competition. It follows that the evaluation of political lines (Europeanism, Atlanticism, reformism) cannot be separated from the analysis of their translatability into organisation: a line may be historically “forward-looking” and yet incapable of hegemony in a given social context.

The transition to the mid-1950s and 1956 is presented as a period in which the nature of the relationship with the PSI changed. Donno emphasises that the premises for the rapprochement predate the dramatic events of October in Hungary, and refers to the meeting between Saragat and Nenni in Pralognan-la-Vanoise (August 1956) as an important step in understanding the incubation of the centre-left and the gradual socialist detachment from the communists. At the same time, the author points out that the Soviet repression in Hungary “revealed” what Saragat and his supporters had been arguing for some time: that the communist regimes of the East would “inevitably degenerate” into bloody totalitarianism.

In this respect, the work closely intertwines international events and internal realignment: the legitimacy of the social democratic position is not only deduced from an Italian political outcome, but also from the evidence, produced by events, of the coercive nature of the Soviet system. We certainly cannot deny that this intertwining corresponds to a real historical experience (the Cold War was a device of meaning as well as a geopolitical structure), but we must also note that the category of “inevitability” risks stiffening the analysis: defining a degeneration as “inevitable” implies adopting a strong theory about the internal dynamics of communist regimes, a theory that can be debated and which, in the field of historiography, would require argumentation and comparison. The author states it as a fact; it will be up to scholars to show to what extent it is used as a political-moral criterion or as an analytical key based on historical evidence.

The transition to 1962 takes on an almost mirror image value compared to 1947: if the former marks the beginning of the Western choice ‘overcoming the communist mortgage’, the latter inaugurates the first centre-left parliamentary experience after fifteen years of critical relations with the PSI. Donno insists that it was precisely the DC’s

opening to the left, accompanied by the PSI's definitive departure from the communists, that represented an "important result" for the social democrats, removing the reasons for the 1947 split, and that this aspect would be "historically neglected" for decades. This is a crucial point because it shifts the focus from the split as a divisive event to the split as a long-term mechanism which, paradoxically, came to an end when the other party (the PSI) came to share the Western position and the culture of government. In this interpretation, the PSLI/PSDI is seen as a "pioneering" and "educational" force with respect to mainstream socialism: a pivotal and mediating role that Donno explicitly emphasises, even referring to Kennedy's "decisive approval" favoured by his meeting with Saragat in February 1963.

This is the context for the more "technical" and, in some ways, more promising topics of the research: economic planning, fiscal policies, anti-cyclical measures, and failed structural reforms. Donno recalls that the launch of the first organic centre-left Moro government (December 1963) was preceded by lengthy discussions in which economic planning – a tool strongly desired by the PSDI and supported by Tremelloni since his collaboration with De Gasperi – met with fierce opposition from the Christian Democrat right, the liberals and Confindustria. He adds that, despite producing positive results, the battle did not lead to the implementation of the "five-year plan" proposed by Antonio Giolitti and that this failure contributed to the government crisis.

This material allows us to avoid a purely political interpretation of the centre-left: here, real conflicts emerge over instruments of government, the rationality of public spending, the capacity for "coordinated" planning of interventions, and the relationship between the public sector and private initiative.

However, the book does not celebrate the centre-left as the logical culmination of the social democratic project. Donno argues that the organic centre-left fell short of expectations because it failed to complete the reform project; it had to operate in a difficult economic situation that prevented the implementation of many reforms and led to "anti-cyclical" measures with tax increases and attempts to reduce spending. Added to this is the criticism of welfare and clientelist policies – especially those of the Christian Democrats – aimed at maintaining electoral consensus, which ultimately caused the "failure" of economic planning understood as the rational planning of public interventions.

This passage is important because it rebalances the overall picture: while the author tends to re-evaluate social democracy, he does so without denying the contradictions of Italian governance. Indeed, he suggests that the centre-left should be seen as a missed opportunity rather than a complete success: a point which, in an academic context, allows the discussion to be removed from the temptation to celebrate.

During the same period, the link between Atlanticism and Europeanism was presented as a defining feature of Saragat's actions. Donno recalls that in December 1964, Saragat, then Minister of Foreign Affairs, presented a proposal for a "Declaration" for a new treaty aimed at institutionalising European integration at the political level as well, providing for systematic political cooperation, the deepening of common policies, support for Britain's entry into the Common Market, the election of the European Parliament by universal suffrage with strengthened powers, and the merger of the three Communities. The author places this initiative in the context of the reconfirmation of the military alliance with the United States, which was engaged in Vietnam, and support for the processes of détente

and nuclear arms limitation. At the same time, he points out that Tremelloni, in the Ministry of Finance, presented bills for bureaucratic simplification and rationalisation of spending, as well as measures to boost production and employment through tax relief on exports, measures that were viewed positively by the US government to the extent that they were described as a “second Einaudi round”.

These reflections are doubly relevant. On the one hand, they show that the work has a density of content that goes beyond political and electoral commentary; on the other, they raise an interpretative problem: the constant search for legitimacy through American recognition (from Kennedy’s “decisive approval” to the positive assessment of fiscal interventions) risks being read, by a critical reader, as an indirect repetition of the very accusation that Donno wants to combat, namely the idea of subordination. The difference, however, lies in the way the author frames such recognition: not as proof of loyalty, but as a contextual element that makes it possible for the PSI to enter government and certifies, on an international level, the reliability of an internal political formula. In other words, external legitimisation is not presented as an end in itself, but as a condition of possibility. This does not eliminate the tension, but makes it more interesting: the history of the Italian centre-left, as is well known, is inseparable from the international framework; and Donno seems to want to accept this fact without embarrassment, claiming it as a structural dimension and not as a moral stigma.

The issue of a “radical antithesis” toward the PCI, invoked in connection with the formation of the third Moro government (February 1966), is presented as a political-propagandistic theme that emerged with particular force, with Moro and the Social Democrats stigmatising communist opposition and asserting a clear differentiation on the “major themes of freedom in society and the state.”

Although this passage is brief, it is also significant because it refers to a line of continuity: the distinction between freedom and democracy as a criterion of identity for democratic socialism, already mentioned by the author in 1947, re-emerges in 1966 in a changed context (detente, Vietnam, social transformations of the boom). The description of the early 1960s as a period marked by the negative social consequences of the economic miracle, inflation and an unfavourable international economic situation, ecclesiastical dynamics (the openness of John XXIII) and geopolitical dynamics (Kennedy’s new frontiers, Vietnam, the Third World, French and German pro-European pressures) serves to show that centre-left politics was born out of a crisis of adaptation: “Degasperian centrism”, despite having revived Italy, appeared incapable of satisfying a growing demand for social assistance and structural reforms. In this context, Donno’s interpretation is consistent: social democracy was not only a stabilising force in 1947-48, but also a force that pushed (or tried to push) towards reformist modernisation in the 1960s.

The issue of balance, however, remains, which the book addresses with both assertive and self-correcting tones. Donno reiterates that, “to anyone who looks beyond ideological schematisms,” the Social Democrats’ significant role in rooting Italian democracy and socialism within Western capitalism cannot be ignored; and he defines the two periods of 1947 and 1962 as junctures in which they played a leading role. At the same time, he acknowledges that the government experience was not without shadows and failures, and that the center-left failed to deliver on its reform promises. This coexistence of vindication and disenchantment is, perhaps, the best key to evaluating the collection: if the

"rehabilitation" were pure celebration, the book would be more of a manifesto than a call for research; but the very insistence on its limitations (organizational weakness, narrow political space, vacillations, and failed planning) suggests that Donno seeks to construct a reasoned reassessment, not a monument.

Of particular interest in this regard is Tremelloni's lengthy quotation on the decline of the PSDI after Saragat's election to the Quirinale: the party "was finished", it would pass into the hands of local leaders and "small men" attached to their positions and intrigues, with the start of factionalism and a gradual loss of votes and leadership quality in the 1970s and 1980s.

The inclusion of this harsh and disenchanting assessment in a book that aims to re-evaluate social democracy serves an important function: it delimits the scope of the discourse and prevents the "other history" operation from being understood as an unconditional defence of everything that was the PSDI. In academic terms, this choice has value: recognising the downward trajectory does not mean denying the relevance of the founding moments; on the contrary, it allows us to better circumscribe the research question, transforming it from a moral question ("who was right?") to a historical question ("why did a line that the author considers forward-looking fail to build organisational continuity and a lasting political culture?").

Critical insights and avenues for research

Firstly, the analysis could have benefited from greater comparison with international historiography on European social democracy and, in particular, with Swedish historiography linked to Olof Palme's post-war government experience, in order to better contextualise the Italian experience within the continental landscape and to highlight its specificities and similarities with other national experiences. Secondly, the work tends to favour a "top-down" perspective, focusing on political and intellectual elites, parliamentary debates and government strategies. Greater attention to social dynamics "from below", to the reception of social democratic policies in Italian society, and to the transformations of the middle and working classes during the period in question would have enriched the analysis and allowed for a more complete assessment of the real impact of the social democratic project. Thirdly, Donno's interpretation, while balanced in its overall assessment, sometimes tends to underestimate the contradictions and limitations of Italian social democratic reformism, especially in its ability to influence the country's economic and social structures. A more in-depth analysis of the concrete economic policies implemented with the contribution of the Social Democrats would have allowed for a more complete assessment of the gap between reformist aspirations and the results actually achieved. Finally, the work could have devoted more space to analysing the decline of the PSDI in the 1970s and 1980s, in order to better understand the reasons for its progressive marginalisation in the Italian political landscape and to assess more fully its legacy in the subsequent evolution of Italian socialism.

Interpretative balance sheet

From a broader perspective, this study therefore seems to offer an interpretative key that may be of interest not only to scholars of party history, but also to those concerned with the history of Italian democracy: the possibility that republican stability was built not only through the choices of major players, but also through the action of minor forces capable of acting as catalysts, guarantors and bridges between political cultures. In this sense, the notion of a “hinge” attributed to the PSDI in the 1962-63 period is particularly evocative because it allows us to interpret the dynamics of the centre-left as the product of multi-level mediation: between the DC and the PSI, between Italy and the United States, between the demand for reforms and economic constraints, between Europeanism and Atlanticism. The risk, of course, is that of over-extending the metaphor and turning the “hinge” into a universal cause. But as an interpretative hypothesis, it is fruitful, especially if it is corroborated by detailed analysis, for example on channels of international dialogue, European socialist networks known as Committee of the International Socialist Conference (Comisco) and policy mechanisms (ERP plans, programming, tax reforms) have already been mentioned in the research.

At the conclusion of this continuation, if we wish to identify the point at which the analysis appears most ambitious, it coincides with the idea that the split of 1947 was not only a traumatic event, but also a historical premise for the *centro-sinistra*; and that Nenni’s socialist autonomism was “born and raised for fifteen years in the social democratic home” until it was adopted by the PSI with the breaking of the “iron” link with the communists. It is a strong interpretation, which reorients the moral chronology of the Italian left, attributing to the secessionist minority a role of anticipation and to majority socialism a role of delay. Its persuasiveness will depend not only on narrative skill, but also on the ability to measure that hypothesis against the resistance, ambiguities and contingencies that the investigation itself does not ignore: the narrowness of the electoral space, financial fragility, internal divisions, the difficulty of translating the choice of camp into substantial reforms, the limitations of the centre-left and, finally, the subsequent degradation of the party described by Tremelloni.

As a whole, the volume constructs an interpretation of social democracy as an interpretative hub capable of reorganising certain established hierarchies of republican political history. The central theme is the idea that Italy’s position in the West, the stabilisation of constitutional freedoms and the very possibility of government reformism cannot be explained solely through the dialectic between the large mass parties, but require us to take seriously the role of a minority force that acted as a balancing, connecting and sometimes accelerating factor. From this perspective, social democracy is not treated as a mere “appendage” of government or as an accident of the Cold War, but as the bearer of an autonomous and coherent political culture, rooted in a reformist genealogy that dates back to the thinking of Filippo Turati and the splits of the early post-war period, and reactivated in the dramatic context of the Reconstruction.

One of the most challenging points of the interpretative proposal is the reinterpretation of the 1947 split as an event that cannot be reduced to a tactical rift. This choice is part of a broader diagnosis of Italian socialism, considered “anomalous” not because of the birth of the PSLI/PSDI, but because of the frontist option of Nenni’s PSI and its alliance with the PCI in a context of political and cultural dependence on Stalinist USSR. The volume, therefore, does not merely defend Saragat: it questions the implicit criterion by which, for

decades, part of historiography and political memory has attributed responsibility and blame. This is all the more significant because it does not treat the Cold War as a mere external scenario, but as a matrix that informs languages, identities and organisational choices, making an “existential” reading of the conflict between liberal democracy and totalitarian models plausible for the actors of the time.

The category of ‘historical reason’ attributed to social democrats (Europeanism, Atlanticism, reformism, criticism of communist regimes) constitutes the cornerstone of the argument, but also the point on which the academic reader is called upon to exercise greater critical vigilance.

While it is entirely legitimate to argue that certain political insights have been subsequently confirmed, historical analysis requires that the outcome not be transformed into a retrospective tribunal that distributes licences of truth. Here, the volume appears more persuasive when it shifts the discourse to verifiable terrain – parliamentary mechanisms, policy choices, documented international positions – and less so when it resorts to formulas that may sound like teleology of the Western landing. The strength of the collection lies precisely in its ability to show “how” a political line operated within stringent constraints: not only by affirming principles, but by translating them into institutional action, into battles over economic instruments, into international networks, into attempts at planning and modernisation.

It is on this level that some particularly significant contributions emerge. Attention to the Marshall Plan is not treated as simple ideological adherence, but as a field of conflict over the management of aid and the model of reconstruction: the role attributed to Tremeloni in drafting plans for the use of ERP funds and in representing Italy at the OEEC allows social democracy to be placed within the administrative and political-economic history of the Reconstruction, removing it from the moralistic reduction of “either with Moscow or with Washington”. At the same time, the issue of economic planning brings to light an often overlooked link between social democratic reformism and instruments of government: planning is presented as an area in which the resistance of the Christian Democrat right, the liberals and industrial representatives is measured, and as a point of friction that helps to explain the limitations and crises of the centre-left experience. The result is an image of social democracy as an actor attempting to govern modernisation in a “social” sense, rather than as a mere guarantor of anti-communist stability.

The reinterpretation of the balance of power in 1948 is constructed in such a way as to highlight the “systemic” impact of a minority group: although not high, the percentage of social democrats is considered significant for the stability of the majority, particularly in the Senate. This argument, if well supported in the body of the essays, invites us to rethink a broader issue: in fragmented parliamentary systems, historical relevance does not necessarily coincide with absolute electoral strength. However, caution is required here, because attributing “decisiveness” to a minor player can slip into a poorly controlled counterfactual: how much could the outcome really have changed without that 7.1%? What coalition alternatives were feasible? What role did international factors and social mobilisations play? The book seems aware of the problem when it highlights the difficulty of the Social Democrats in translating their position into influence within governments dominated by the Christian Democrats and constrained by unfavourable power relations. It is

precisely this awareness that, in many ways, makes the proposal more credible: claiming a historical role without denying operational impotence is a way of avoiding hagiography.

The parable of governmental collaboration appears, in fact, to be a laboratory of ambivalence. On the one hand, participation in centrist governments is presented as a choice of democratic responsibility and as an attempt to steer reconstruction along lines compatible with social justice and international integration; on the other hand, the sequence of oscillations, splits and rethinkings signals how unstable the position of a party squeezed between a large social-communist bloc and a Christian Democratic Party capable of monopolising institutional centrality was. The story of electoral reform and the birth of *Unità Popolare*, with its effect on the majority bonus of 1953, is particularly instructive: it shows that social democracy was not always and only a “crutch” for centrism, but experienced internal conflicts and choices that produced unforeseen or uncontrolled consequences, exposing its organisational fragility and the difficulty of maintaining a consistent line in a polarised context.

A theme emerges that the collection insistently raises and that deserves to be taken up as an analytical key in this part: social democracy as a project that is “politically necessary” but “sociologically fragile”. The party is described as lacking a solid mass base, unable to win over either the industrial and peasant proletariat – controlled by stronger apparatuses – or the middle classes on a permanent basis; and burdened by a chronic lack of financial resources that limited its propaganda, territorial presence and organisational capacity. One of the strengths of the work is that the analysis is not limited to leaders and “high-level” choices, but includes, at least as an explanatory variable, the material conditions of political competition. In this way, the minority is not presented as a mere injustice of history or as a product of ideological hostility, but also as the result of organisational structures and a particularly unfavourable political market.

The international dimension, as used in the book, is not merely a framework for legitimisation. The meeting in Pralognan in 1956 and the Soviet repression in Hungary are taken as moments capable of reorienting balances and languages, helping to make the socialist detachment from the PCI more practicable and paving the way for the centre-left. Here too, the interpretation is all the more convincing in that it avoids equating international events with automatic changes in domestic policy. The merit of the collection lies in its insistence that the realignment processes were slow, conflictual and preceded the explosion of 1956, and that the dialogue between Saragat and Nenni was part of a long-term process. The result is a reconstruction that, at least in its intentions, aims to integrate short and long timeframes: external shocks and political learning, international crises and domestic reorganisations.

The period from 1962 to 1966, from the perspective of the book, represents the second major turning point. The centre-left is seen as the partial outcome of a process in which social democracy acted as a facilitator: the “hinge” between Christian Democrat openness and socialist autonomy, international reassurance about the government formula, insistence on planning and reforms, and participation in pro-European and Atlanticist choices. It is a challenging thesis because it shifts the focus of the explanation from Moro and Nenni to a minor player; nevertheless, it is stimulating, especially when supported by concrete elements, such as the proposal to institutionalise European integration at the political level and the description of the battles over economic planning. The picture that

emerges is not that of an “inevitable” centre-left, but that of a difficult balance between the demand for reforms, economic constraints and internal resistance within the coalitions; a balance that produces results but also frustrations, leading to unpopular anti-cyclical measures and the failure to implement a comprehensive reform plan.

At this point, the collection makes a significant interpretative choice: criticism of the centre-left is not used to devalue the social democratic line, but rather to highlight the structural limitations of Italian governability and the inertia of the Christian Democrat power system, which, according to the author, was inclined towards welfare and clientelist policies that compromised the rationality of planning.

This judgement is important because it avoids a simplistic opposition between “good” and “bad”: even strategies considered correct can fail in the absence of adequate institutional and coalition conditions. At the same time, the harsh diagnosis of clientelism and welfare policies risks, if not supported by detailed analysis, reproducing a widely held interpretative topos on the First Republic; but, when included in the discussion on planning, it can become a concrete avenue of research, capable of linking political culture, economic instruments and government practices.

In terms of the history of political ideas, the volume works with a set of identity categories that are constantly traced back to the freedom/democracy divide. The opposition to the PCI is presented not as “visceral” anti-communism, but as an antithesis based on “the great themes of freedom in society and the state”.

In addition, there is a clear intention: to remove social democracy from the image of an anti-communist force by proxy and restore its dignity as an autonomous political culture, which places socialism within the confines of liberal democracies and within an idea of a social market economy.

This is a point that, for an academic reader, may be convincing if accompanied by linguistic and documentary analyses capable of showing the actual construction of this identity, its reception in different contexts and its translation into institutional choices. Otherwise, there is a risk that the category will remain declarative. However, the collection seems to be equipped with a documentary apparatus which, although marked by gaps (dispersion of archives), attempts a triangulation between party press, personal funds and institutional sources, precisely in order to anchor the reconstruction to multiple materials.

One aspect that an academic review must consider is the very nature of the work as a collection of essays. The anthological form has obvious advantages: it allows the reader to follow a research path spanning almost twenty years, provides specific insights (figures, episodes, turning points) and shows the progressive maturation of a historiographical hypothesis. But it also carries a risk: the possible lack of consistency in tone, the possible repetition of core arguments, and the variability of premises and objectives in the various original texts. In works of this kind, interpretative cohesion depends largely on the ability to construct a framework that harmonises the plurality of contributions. The volume seems to pursue this cohesion through a number of recurring themes – 1947 and 1962 as turning points, Europeanism and Atlanticism as coordinates, planning and reconstruction as policy tests, Saragat and Tremelloni as key figures – which reappear as elements of a unified narrative. The overall coherence, however, will have to be assessed by reading the essays in their entirety: the risk with an anthology is always that it will

transform a historiographical hypothesis into a refrain, whereas its greatest value lies in the repetition becoming an accumulation of evidence and a variation of perspectives.

The profile of Saragat that emerges from the collection tends to place him at the crossroads between domestic and foreign policy: not only a party leader, but also an interpreter of an international positioning strategy and promoter of a “political” Europeanist project, not merely an economic one, with proposals that anticipated issues that were to become central in the following decades (direct election of the European Parliament, strengthening of powers, political cooperation between states, merger of the Communities). This is one of the most potentially original points, because it invites us to reconsider Italian Europeanism not only as a product of Catholic or liberal-democratic cultures, but as an integral part of a democratic socialist tradition that sees integration as a means of peace, modernisation and democratic consolidation. At the same time, the emphasis on the Atlanticism/Europeanism nexus forces us to reflect on tensions and trade-offs: the military alliance, Vietnam, détente, domestic public opinion, resistance from the left. This is where the volume can make a truly useful contribution: showing how a minority political culture attempted to reconcile international compatibility and social reformism, and what frictions arose as a result.

The assessment of the subsequent decline of the PSDI – with the loss of leadership quality, the emergence of local power dynamics, and political patronage – is introduced not to weaken the thesis, but to define a period in which social democracy played a particularly intense historical role.

This choice is methodologically correct: a re-evaluation cannot turn into indiscriminate absolutism. On the contrary, the diagnosis of decline can be used to pose a more profound historiographical question: what is the relationship between political culture and party form? To what extent can a “high” line (Europeanism, Atlanticism, planning) survive if it does not translate into an organisational structure and a widespread ethos? And what conditions in the political system of the First Republic made it more likely for minor parties to metamorphose into machines of intermediation and power? In this sense, the epilogue does not diminish the value of the reconstruction; rather, it opens up an interpretative path that connects the first twenty years of the Republic to the pathologies of the subsequent phase.

Overall, the book appears to be an attempt to reconstruct a historical subject that has long been deprived of a balanced assessment, restoring its political, cultural and institutional significance. Its strengths lie in the choice to connect the history of political parties with the history of public policy, in placing the international dimension at the centre as an explanatory rather than merely descriptive variable, and in offering a coherent narrative linking the major turning points of 1947-48 and 1962-66 as moments in which social democracy acted as a stabilising agent and facilitator of government reformism. From an academic point of view, the critical issues coincide with the typical risks of an “enabling” narrative: the possibility of excessive teleology in the evaluation of choices, and the tendency to read a plurality of interpretations as “prejudice” when, in reality, they may derive from different scales of analysis or different criteria of relevance. But precisely because the volume does not eliminate contradictions – organisational weakness, strategic fluctuations, reform failures, subsequent decline – it lends itself to being discussed not as a simple counter-manifesto, but as a proposal for the renewal of a field of study: an

invitation to rethink, with new sources and new questions, the relationship between the left, democracy and Italy's international position in the republican era.

Ultimately, the collection does not close the debate: it reopens it. Its value lies in forcing the reader to grapple with connections that are taken for granted (division and democracy, alliances and reforms, Europe and modernisation) and in suggesting documentary and comparative checks, including from a European perspective, even today, for the national post-war period.

The work is not only intended for scholars of contemporary history and political parties, but also for anyone who wishes to understand the complex events of the Italian left in the post-war period and the origins of democratic socialism in our country. At a time when public debate continues to grapple with issues such as the relationship between socialism and freedom, reformism and radicalism, Europeanism and sovereignty, Donno's reconstruction provides useful elements for a critical reading of both the past and present of Italian democracy.

The publication of this volume therefore makes a significant contribution to the renewal of Italian political historiography, demonstrating the validity of a method capable of combining rigorous documentary research with powerful interpretation, and of recovering the complexity of historical processes while maintaining a focus on the political and cultural implications of the historian's work. In this context, Donno's book fits into the tradition of critical historiography which, going beyond ideological frameworks and simplifications, aims to restore Italian political history to its full density, articulation and wealth of possible interpretations.