

The Potential of Green Politics in Italy

An interview with Lorenzo Marsili, Rossella Muroli

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Italy is one of the largest European countries without a major green presence in politics. Longstanding local struggles, an organised movement, and growing awareness across society have not yet prompted the main parties or the world of business to take environmental concerns seriously either. What explains the state of green politics in Italy and does the ecological transition offer a route away from socio-economic stagnation? Lorenzo Marsili spoke to Rossella Muroli, environmentalist and MP for the centre-left coalition Liberi e Uguali.

Lorenzo Marsili: The “green wave” seems to have mainly washed northern European shores and urban centres, while it is absent from eastern and southern Europe, including Italy. Why the difference?

Rossella Muroli: Political ecology has often had to fight in the trenches in Italy. This specificity goes beyond the mistakes that have certainly been made by the Greens in our country. Italy is the country of illegal construction, the country where it is still difficult to get data on industrial emissions and where land decontamination makes little progress. Environmental struggles tend to be more defensive, especially in the South where they intertwine with organised crime. It is hard to win broad popular support for environmentalism when it is a rear-guard battle.

Why does environmentalism in Italy seem to lack a political dimension? It seems that a focus on local struggles has prevented the emergence of a forward-looking green vision.

It is a vicious circle: the lack of representation has made politics unresponsive to ecological demands when they arise, which in turn marginalises them further. I must say that the presence of a very strong civil society association such as Legambiente [an environmentalist association with around 115 000 members] has also prevented, from a certain point of view, the birth of a strong ecological political force.

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You’re a former president of Legambiente!

I realise that and I take responsibility. On top of that, when the Democratic Party was born in 2007, many environmentalists thought that it could be a place for political ecology to find a home. Matteo Renzi’s primary campaign for the party leadership in 2013 advocated reaching 100-per-cent renewable energy.

After becoming prime minister in 2014, Renzi came out in support of drilling for oil off the Italian coasts. This isn’t unique, much of the Italian centre-left remains prey to a productivist vision of the economy.

There is a lack of awareness of environmental issues. I trivialise, but I spoke about bees and pesticides in the Italian Parliament recently and many of my colleagues looked at me bemused. It was as if I were talking about cute but naïve and ultimately irrelevant subjects. In Europe, on the other hand, the issue of pesticides and bee extinction is considered in all its importance and linked to health, productivity, and soil quality. The dominant political culture sees production as something separate from people's quality of life and health.

It's not only in politics, the same could also be said for the world of industry and business. Devising an environmentally sustainable model is the interest of manufacturers and producers too.

One of the great problems is Confindustria, the national union of industrialists. Confindustria defends and preserves a model that history is fast making obsolete. Investments in the green economy are increasingly favoured by finance internationally, and finance is not governed by environmental extremists. There is a gap in the culture and a lack of vision in industry.

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Following the approval of the European Union ban on single-use plastics, I met with plastic manufacturers. Italy should have known that it produces 70 per cent of the single-use plastic consumed in Europe. It was in the national interest to follow the progress of that directive, to study its application in depth and, above all, to accompany Italian industry towards the necessary transformation. But politics failed. The investments encouraged in the most recent package of industrial measures, Industry 4.0, did not take any interest in promoting a sustainable transformation of production.

For years Italy has suffered from its lack of serious industrial policy. Could Green New Deal could be the chance to reclaim a steering role for the state in the economy?

The idea of a Green New Deal is first and foremost an opportunity for a great industrial plan for the country. But as an ecologist, I see this plan as a holistic transformation, a Copernican revolution of roles in society. Citizens, for example, can move from simply being poorly informed consumers to become suppliers of raw material, whether through recycling or energy production. In the classic production system, less aware people are, the better, as consumption depends on people being unaware of the ecological, economic, and social consequences of production.

The Green New Deal should also be of great interest to the industrial sector, the ecological transformation is coming regardless and it's important to be prepared. What I find unbearable is that large Italian companies often do great work abroad and nothing in Italy. I'm thinking of Enel Green Power or even Eni. I feel betrayed by this state-assisted capitalism.

But the companies you mentioned are state owned?

Exactly, so the state should have the power to guide their policy. Several publicly owned companies such as energy firms Eni and Enel or transport giants like the national railways could profoundly change Italy by redirecting their investments.

That's the direction advocated by Mariana Mazzucato. But as far as the entrepreneurial state is concerned,

it is often not clear how radical green politics is in questioning a financial system that often blocks state investment. Ann Pettifor [read more in her [recent interview](#)] has argued that states should disregard European rules and borrow to pay for green investments. Where should the resources come from?

One of the biggest flaws in the EU today, especially at a time when Europe wants to give itself a new rationale around the European Green Deal, is that it has ruled out the exclusion of green investment from debt calculations. Without such reform, this Green Deal will be a fake deal.

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When nationalist populism offers seemingly simple recipes, telling citizens that we need to change European rules or issue green bonds risks sounding unrealistic. Frankly, these measures will take years to be implemented, if they ever are.

Yes, these types of arguments risk not reaching large parts of the Italian population. The concerning thing about the rise of Matteo Salvini is how the Lega’s support went from 4 to 30 per cent working on sentiments that did not appear to be so deeply rooted in Italian society. Italy deluded itself in thinking that it was a staunchly pro-European country. The detachment felt from the European institutions is becoming strong and entrenched. Politics has a great responsibility for the situation. I remember the Mario Monti government [a technocratic austerity government in power between 2011 and 2013] talking about the need to shed “tears and blood because Europe demands it”. “Europe demands it” was Italian political class’s excuse for ducking its responsibility for painful choices, even when they were necessary. Europe has been a great scapegoat. I’m not sure if there is a similar situation elsewhere.

Britain?

Indeed.

Social problems are particularly acute in Italy. Unlike Spain, Italy has not returned to growth. Poverty on the rise and an economy still smaller and more unequal than before 2008. How does political ecology address this social emergency?

This is one of the most important elements for political ecology to develop. The green platform in Italy has not accounted for the growth in inequality. Instruments such as the “ecobonus”, which provides for tax breaks for private investment in energy efficiency, objectively only speak to people who can afford to renovate their house and who earn enough to reclaim the investment in tax rebates over several years. The traditional parties and the Left are behind on green issues, but political ecology has also been short-sighted regarding the class that it speaks to.

Do you have an example of a policy going in that direction?

In the last budget, I passed an amendment that allowed councils to prioritise funding for energy efficiency in social housing. Public money will be used to transform some of the poorest homes in Italy. Tenants that struggled to pay their electricity bills will begin producing energy themselves, creating empowered and autonomous energy communities.

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remains to be done, but Italy wants to change and only awaits a political space that is up to the challenge.

Is there room for a green political force capable of embodying these ideas in a credible way?

Yes, but it's a long way across the desert. It takes generosity, vision, and the desire to talk to the thousands of experiences that have arisen in the meantime: the fragmentation and multiplicity of groups is very high. Political ecology could be a way to attract people back to politics. As far as I am concerned, my camp is the centre-left, but I also hope that forces to the right of politics become more aware. Ecology should cut across political lines.

Beyond party politics, what are the prospects for political ecology in Italian society? The main movement taking the streets in Italy these days, the Sardines, doesn't seem to be particularly sensitive to environmental concerns.

Italy has come a long way. Entire generations of politicians have won elections by promising amnesties for illegal building and resisting traffic bans. But environmental awareness has grown enormously. Much remains to be done, but Italy wants to change and only awaits a political space that is up to the challenge. For the moment, the Sardines have indeed said little or nothing about the environment, and this surprised me. But the Sardines are born as a reaction to Salvini and the politics of hatred: linking the fight against climate change to the fight against nationalism is not straightforward. Yet the link is there: those who defend fossil fuels, cut down the Amazon, and mock climate change are often the same politicians who spread hate speech, nationalism, and stigmatise migrants as the enemy. Complexity has always been a challenge for the green movement. Greta Thunberg has performed a miracle by popularising ecological demands and simplifying them without renouncing scientific accuracy.

Many years ago, I wrote to the then-co-president of the European Greens, Monica Frassoni, to suggest that they run directly with the European Green Party in Italian elections as the first transnational candidacy. If you were to give one piece of advice to the European Greens so that they might gain a glimmer of representation in Italy, what would it be?

First of all, to care about Italy. The European Greens cannot be content with being a federation with large gaps in their presence across Europe. I would like to see the representatives of the European Greens travelling to Italy and working politically. You can't leave Italy so far behind. And at the same time, the Italian Green party has to stop closing its doors. The idea of being self-sufficient is contradictory to modern ecology – as Alex Langer's lesson should have taught us. We need to embark on a new path together with the European Greens, but with the awareness that the absence of a strong Green party has not prevented Italian society from organising itself. The starting point should be weaving together the numerous ecological initiatives with patience and generosity.



Lorenzo Marsili is an activist philosopher and writer and co-founder of the transnational NGO European Alternatives. He is an active public speaker and media commentator internationally and was the founding editor of the independent journal Naked Punch Review. He currently serves on the Board of the global NGO CIVICUS. His books include *Citizens of Nowhere* (Zed Books, 2018) and *Planetary Politics* (Polity Press, forthcoming 2020).



Rossella Muroli is an ecologist and a Member of the Italian Parliament. She has been president of *Legambiente*, Italy's main environmental organisation, and is the author of numerous publications on sustainable tourism and environmental quality in urban areas.

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