

CONTEXTS AND DEBATES

Rethinking the end of Christian Democracy

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Abstract

This article is about the seminar held at Luiss University in Rome on 17 June 2024. The seminar focused on ‘The End of Christian Democracy: A New Direction for Research’ and was the first milestone and official launch of the PRIN research project ‘The End of Christian Democracy: The Collapse of a Political Dream – Voices from the Margins’, led by a consortium of four universities: Luiss, Roma Tre, Bologna and Suor Orsola Benincasa, Naples.

Keywords: Christian Democracy; margins; experiences; endings; leadership; memory; political and existential uncertainty

On 17 June 2024, Luiss University hosted a workshop on ‘The End of Christian Democracy: A New Direction for Research’. This was the first milestone and the official launch of a research project titled ‘The End of Christian Democracy: The Collapse of a Political Dream – Voices from the Margins’ (Endream), funded by the Ministry of University and Research and by Next Generation EU, through PRIN (Progetti di ricerca di rilevante interesse nazionale or Research Project of National Interest). PRIN has provided, for two decades now, funding for public research with a view to promoting the Italian research system, strengthening co-operation between universities and research organisations, and encouraging national participation in initiatives that are part of the European Union’s Framework Programme for Research and Innovation.

Endream is a two-year project led by a consortium of four universities (research units) and carefully selected members with a promising track record of collaborative research: Luiss University, Rome (Rosario Forlenza and Giovanni Orsina, with the support of post-doctoral researcher Enrico Ciappi), Alma Mater University of Bologna (Michele Marchi), Roma Tre University (Paolo Carusi), and Suor Orsola Benincasa, Naples (Eugenio Capozzi). The seminar on 17 June was an opportunity to discuss the aims, objectives and research questions of the project, as well as its overall research approach, methodology and main hypothesis. To this end, the consortium leading the project invited Vincenzo Scotti, Francesca Russo, Mario Segni, Pierluigi Castagnetti and Paolo Giaretta – former members of the political party Democrazia Cristiana (Christian Democracy) – to share their political experiences. Historians Vera Capperucci (Luiss) and Alfredo Canavero (University of Milan, La Statale) enriched the programme with their informed and critical views.

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Endream sets a new agenda by exploring the end of Christian Democracy – the dominant party of Italian politics for almost five decades – in the early 1990s from the point of view of the ‘margins’. The term ‘margins’ deserves further clarification. It suggests that the focus of the project is not only on the systemic, structural and institutional issues at stake at a crucial juncture of Italian political history, but also on the experiences of members of the party, both elites and grassroots militants, and how they lived through and made sense of the political disruption of their values and horizon of expectations. Emerging scholarship has recognised the need to understand the end of Christian Democracy and the transformation of Catholic politics from the 1980s to the 1990s at a deeper level and in the wider national and international political context (see, for example, Ceci 2022, 2021, 2020; Capperucci 2021; Acanfora 2018; Formigoni, Pombeni and Vecchio 2023, 549–579). Yet, much of the existing work has neglected the lived experiences of members at the moment of the dissolution of the party, thus hindering a deeper understanding of the social, political and cultural processes that pervaded Italy from the 1980s to the 1990s.

Conversely, Endream wants to explore not only how Christian Democrats fulfilled a political function within an administrative apparatus performing, *pace* Eric Voegelin, an ‘elementary representation’; it also wants to explore how they experienced personally the dissolution of their world and lived through the liminal juncture between the old that was dying and the unknown new that was emerging – thus unravelling the link between politics and representation, going beyond the institutional level and capturing what Voegelin would define ‘existential representation’.

At the operational level, Endream wants to examine the lived experiences of elites and militants as a clue to unearth their changing social and cultural norms, and their sense of their time and place in history. Christian Democracy was not simply a political party; like its main counterpart, the Italian Communist Party (PCI), it was a community of feelings and beliefs, providing its militants with stability, protection and existential meaning. Unlike the PCI, this anthropological and existential dimension of membership in Christian Democracy has been much less recognised and substantially underestimated in the existing literature (for a notable exception see Forlenza and Thomassen 2024). Anthropologist David Kertzer depicted vividly the conflict between the factions that struggled over the transformation of the PCI in the early 1990s and the anguish and dismay of party members for whom communism was the core of their political, cultural and existential identity (Kertzer 1998; see also Boarelli 2007; Fantoni 2014; Forlenza 2022). In a similar vein, one of the main ambitions of Endream is to restore the complexity and depth of people’s participation in the life and death of Christian Democracy. Shifting attention away from the structural, institutional and ideological to the existential and experiential level will allow us to grasp to what extent the transformation remained open, how a political identity disappeared while no other identity was yet formed, and how such a vacuum became the background upon which the process of making sense of the crisis infused individuals and the political community with new meanings. From such a perspective, Endream wishes to address a series of interrelated questions: What did the disappearance of the party mean for its members? How did they make sense of the collapse of their political dream? What was the legacy of their previous political engagement and how did such a legacy influence their subsequent political ideas and experiences? How did the ‘empty place of power’, to borrow a term from political theorist Claude Lefort, left by the end of a party that had dominated the country since the end of the Second World War shape the transformation of Italian politics and the emergence of what has been called, with little historical imagination, the ‘second’ republic?

The ‘margins’ that the project alludes to are also historical and geographical. Indeed, Endream wants to look closely at three relevant regional case studies: Veneto,

Campania and Emilia. In much of the Veneto (especially in the provinces of Vicenza, Padua and Rovigo), Christian Democracy emerged out of a powerful 'white' (i.e. Catholic) subculture that dated back to the end of the nineteenth century. In the case of Campania, as well as much of the South, the party gained loyalty, allegiance and electoral support mainly through state patronage and an ambitious programme of socio-economic reforms (from the Agrarian reform to the *Cassa per il Mezzogiorno*). In the case of Emilia, in contrast, Christian Democracy was generally weak in term of popular electoral support – with a few local exceptions – but imbued with a significant wealth of intellectual capital associated with 'democratic Catholicism' and the influence of Giuseppe Dossetti.

The reason for the choice of an analytical framework that privileges the intersection of place and politics is quite simple. The most recognisable aspect of the history of republican and democratic Italy, from the Second World War until the early 1990s, was the history of large mass-based parties, with their own specific ideologies and social safety nets, as well as their organised structures distributed throughout the country. Much of the strength of Christian Democracy lay in the way the party itself functioned as a transmission belt between centre and periphery, Rome and the provinces, the low and the high. Grievances and demands from below were passed upwards; benefits (ranging from state infrastructure projects to other forms of socioeconomic legislation) were delivered downwards. Voters and militants wanted something tangible in return for their loyalty and their militancy. The relationship between local leaders, *comitati provinciali*, national leaders, the party and the government was central to the political process of post-Second World War Italy.

Hence, the perspective of the 'margins' is a privileged point of view to examine the distinctive historical and political experience of Christian Democracy. The margins are not a residual aspect of Italian politics. Instead, they are its heart and flesh. To focus on the margins is to focus on the locus of politics captured in its making, in the mechanisms of its daily work, where 'State', 'Nation' and 'Government' lose their capital letters and are at work within fragments of civil society. It is to focus on the specific historical, cultural and geographical contexts where lived experiences and social practices unfold. Yet, Endream is aware of the importance and significance of the big picture. The margins are conceivable only in reference to broader frames; they do not exist without the national dimension. It becomes central, therefore, to evaluate how the dissonances, affinities and exchanges between the different levels unfolded and crystallised within the processes of politicisation and democratisation of the county.

Endream has three interrelated aims. Empirically, through interviews with former members of the party, it wants to collect new knowledge, creating a set of data that will also be helpful for future research. An open archive of interviews will be created at Roma Tre University, under the co-ordination of Carusi, who for a few years now has engaged with the field of oral history. The idea here is to examine the relationship between memory, identity and culture, placing such a relationship in the context of social and political transformations marked by deep discontinuity: How can we understand this socio-temporal discontinuity and the way in which groups and individuals made sense of it, thus reflecting on their own identity? In the process, the research team will analyse historical accounts and memories not in relation to their accuracy and authenticity but as fragments of a *Weltbild* emerging out of a crisis. In addition, the team will explore new sources from local archives in the regions considered. Historically, Endream wants to examine Italy's passage from the 'first' to the 'second' republic from a political as well as an existential and experiential perspective. Theoretically, the project wants to reflect on how a political process ends, thus suggesting that an engagement with 'endings' can serve to throw critical light on the wider process of the political. We are in dire need

of understanding what the end of Christian Democracy meant for the history and politics of Italy. Engaging with ‘the end’ means elucidating the wider process that started with the initial rupture of the status quo and ended with competing and contrasting attempts to close such a liminal moment – or to keep it open, as an unfulfilled promise.

After a concise introductory remark in which Forlenza touched upon such key aspects, Orsina skilfully shepherded the discussion and the debate of the first session, in which Scotti, Russo, Segni, Castagnetti and Giaretta – who lived the experience of the end of Christian Democracy in a variety of ways – offered their personal recollection as well as their reflections on such a critical passage in Italian history. A series of crucial issues of the greatest historical and political relevance were put on the table in this session: from the end of the Cold War and its impact on Italian politics to the sociological and anthropological transformation of Italian society in the 1970s and 1980s; from the centre–periphery cleavage to the question of ‘corruption’ and ‘morality’ and the relationship between politics and the judiciary at the time of *tangentopoli*; from the problem of political representation and how to channel popular demands into political decision making to the role of the church and the wider world of Catholicism.

More specifically, Castagnetti noted how the party failed to reform itself in the 1980s, thus becoming defenceless vis-à-vis incipient national and global challenges. At the beginning of the 1990s – under the combined pressure of profound cultural changes that had started in the 1980s with the ‘second economic miracle’ and the modernisation of the society that it mirrored, the end of the Cold War, and the morass of corruption that pervaded Italy – the crisis culminated in the accusations of betrayal that members and voters increasingly directed at the party. Scotti echoed such a view, adding a more nuanced and historically sensitive tone, maintaining that the decline of Christian Democracy was the result of a generational interruption: the leaders of the 1980s were unable to keep alive the spirit of the party’s foundation. Giaretta offered thoughtful reflections from the relevant perspective of the Veneto, where he played a major role (as the last Christian Democratic mayor of Padua) before moving to national politics and serving as member of the Senate from 1996 to 2013. He pointed out that the end of Christian Democracy in the Veneto came with a paradox: on the one hand, the party could still count on a huge reserve of social capital (and popular support) at the beginning of the 1990s; on the other hand, the signs of crisis had been evident at the least since the beginning of the 1980s and deeply felt by the local elites, but they had been largely ignored by the party’s national leadership. In 1983, Toni Bisaglia, at the time a powerful national leader, raised the flag of ‘autonomism’, with reference both to federal reform of the state and to a reorganisation of the Christian Democracy of the Veneto on the Bavarian model of the Christian Social Union, to counter the fledgling ‘Liga’ that was emerging in the region (predating a parallel development in neighbouring Lombardy). Finally, Segni mentioned the combined effects of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the devastating financial crisis that followed. Yet he warned that the picture is not complete without considering crucial internal factors that predated this period, including the crisis of the Italian party system and the ossification of political representation.

Marchi wrapped up the first session by asking provocatively whether the end of Christian Democracy was in fact inevitable because the party had reached its goal and fulfilled its historical function – the reconstruction of Italy after the disaster of war and totalitarianism, the stabilisation of the system and the defeat of communism.

In the second section of the seminar, chaired by Carusi, Capperucci and Canavero offered further food for thought. Capperucci reviewed comprehensively the existing literature on the end of Christian Democracy (see also Capperucci 2002; Ceci 2018; Panvini 2016), indicating its most significant gaps and the historical knots at the intersection of national as well as international politics that still need to be assessed. She left on

the table a couple of central questions: Did the end of Christian Democracy mean the end of *centrismo* in Italian politics? And did the party disappear because its people disappeared? If not, where did they go? Canavero instead insisted on the *longue durée* of the crisis – which he traced back to the party congress in Naples in 1962, when Aldo Moro, introducing the category of ‘autonomy’, indicated the need to create a clear distinction between politics and religion. He also invited members to look carefully at the relationship between the Vatican and the party, a central issue in the whole history of republican Italy that became all the more relevant between the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s.

At the end of the session, Capozzi pointed out the importance of assessing the overlap and intersection of long-term and short-term triggers that provided the conditions of possibility for the end of Christian Democracy – and for the opening up of a moment of political electricity in which the new and the old collided, structures were loosened, and meanings were open to scrutiny and renegotiation.

Rethinking the end of Christian Democracy more firmly within a political and experiential perspective means allowing space for the coexistence of various temporalities at play in the disruption and reformulation of the concept of the political, recognising both a long-term perspective and the *longue durée* of history and the role played by more sudden ‘social dramas’, where meanings are radically opened up for renegotiation. The sources of the crisis predated the early 1990s but they became politically relevant only in the highly liminal context of the years 1992–4.

The end of a party – and the end of any political experience – opens up an empty place of power that is both unstructured and highly structuring: the old patterns of meaning and behaviour are dramatically challenged in an atmosphere of radical distrust and uncertainty, but the problematisation of the political dimension, transformative experiences and the rearticulation of values during the liminal period generate new structures and a new set of underlying values that, once established, will slide back to the level of the taken for granted. Until another crisis erupts.

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Italian summary

L'articolo tratta del seminario svoltosi il 17 giugno 2024 presso l'Università Luiss di Roma sul tema 'La fine della Democrazia Cristiana: Prospettive di una ricerca'. Il seminario la prima occasione di discussione e il lancio ufficiale del progetto di ricerca PRIN 'La fine della Democrazia Cristiana: Il collasso di un sogno politico – voci dai margini' condotto da un consorzio di quattro università: Luiss, Roma Tre, Bologna e Suor Orsola Benincasa, Napoli.

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