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Paul Ginsborg, 1945–2022

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Paul Ginsborg was the most influential British historian of Italy of his generation. Like Denis Mack Smith before him, he was well known not only to fellow historians but to general readers of history and the wider public in Italy. If he achieved this standing, it was on account of his writing, his public engagement, his political activism and his teaching. Unlike Mack Smith, who – as a Fellow of All Souls - had few students despite being widely regarded as the 'maestro' of many (including Ginsborg), he was a passionate and brilliant teacher. Greatly admired by his many undergraduate and postgraduate students in the UK and Italy, he influenced numerous others who learned about the history of modern and contemporary Italy from his books. At the time of his death in May 2022, Paul was honorary president of the Association for the Study of Modern Italy, a society he helped found in 1982 and to whose development he was always committed.

Paul was born in London in 1945 and was raised in Ealing, the son of a doctor and a pharmacist and the second of three brothers. He won scholarships to St Paul's school and then to Queen's College, Cambridge, where he studied History and subsequently undertook his PhD on Daniele Manin and the Venetian revolution of 1848. His supervisor was Brian Pullan. He would return to Cambridge in 1980 as a University Lecturer in Politics and Fellow of Churchill College. It might be wondered how a historian of the Risorgimento, who had been a lecturer in History at York University and who had given up that post to teach and research in Italy, came to be appointed to teach European politics. The Cambridge Social and Political Sciences committee (it did not have the status of a department or faculty) was an atypical environment. Headed by the anthropologist John Barnes, it included the sociologists Anthony Giddens and Geoffrey Hawthorn as well as the political theorist John Dunn and the Soviet historian John Barber. Regarded as off-beat by UK political scientists and far lower profile than Oxford (where the Philosophy, Politics and Economics BA had existed since the 1920s), it was a vibrant community in which radical ideas and alternative approaches enjoyed full citizenship (the core first year course in Politics was called 'Revolutions'). Paul was no stranger to radicalism, having been engaged on the far left during his years in Italy and involved in Cambridge with protests against university complicity with the Greek military junta that culminated in the famous Garden House riot in 1970. He had also, by the time he returned to Cambridge, been commissioned by Penguin to write what would become his best-known and most successful book, *A History of Contemporary Italy: Society and Politics, 1943-1992*. It was the long gestation of this work that had led him to give up his lectureship at York for temporary teaching contracts in Milan and Turin so that he could research the contemporary period. By the time he returned to Cambridge,

he was fully immersed in the historiography and the politics of postwar Italy. One of the first papers he gave, to the renowned social history seminar run at King's College by Gareth Stedman-Jones, was on the 1944 agrarian reform of the Communist Minister of Agriculture Fausto Gullo. In contrast to later reforms which created a class of small peasant proprietors, this reform distributed land left uncultivated by landowners to peasants' cooperatives. The paper would subsequently appear in *History Workshop Journal*.

Paul approached contemporary Italy as historian and even when his work touched the present, as it would do frequently, he would bring his deep knowledge of the nineteenth century to bear. Political Science was not a field that he had much affinity with (though in Cambridge, oddly, the title of Professor of Political Science was held by the intellectual historian Quentin Skinner, who had nothing to do with SPS). Conflict and collective movements, the challenge of achieving reforms, the successes and failures of the left, and the state and civil society were his recurrent themes. His reading of Gramsci and commitment to social history, as well as his human sympathy with the common people, led him to focus on issues that had not previously received much attention.

The subtitle of *A History of Contemporary Italy* – that is, *Society and Politics* - alluded to the fact that politics and the state in his analysis were set in the broader context of a changing society: the family, gender, clientelism and work all figured prominently. A rich text, carefully crafted over many years, it was marked by a rare ability to capture both larger forces and trends and the telling detail. It instantly became the go-to book for anyone researching or teaching postwar Italy, as well as for a wider educated readership beyond that. The book had a remarkable impact in Italy, where the contemporary period had only recently become fully accepted as an appropriate field of inquiry for historians. Published by Einaudi, it was admired for its extraordinary sweep, its powerful interpretations of key events and the clarity of the prose. Inevitably, it also received criticism, some of it ungenerous or misconceived (Rossana Rossanda attacked the book as a work lacking in original sources, failing to appreciate that any broad general history is bound to draw on and synthesise the writings of others). Other historians who produced postwar histories in the same period took different tacks: more conventionally political in the cases of Aurelio Lepre and Giuseppe Mammarella, more attentive to literature and culture in that of Silvio Lanaro. But it was Ginsborg's best-selling text that became the most widely used on university courses and even in schools (Einaudi published an edition for use in secondary schools).

It was in the aftermath of publication of this book that Paul left Cambridge, where he had risen to Reader, for Italy, taking up the post of Professor of Contemporary European History at the University of Florence. He was not alone in making such a move. Under a new law that allowed universities to appoint foreigners of 'chiara fama' without going through the conventional competitive procedure, several British historians were appointed in a similar way: Paul Corner to Siena, Adrian Lyttleton to Pisa, Stuart Woolf to Venice and Percy Allum to Naples. Combined with John Davis leaving for the USA, this 'brain drain' left a generation gap in UK Italian historical studies, though most of those mentioned remained active members of ASMI. In Italy, British appointees sometimes encountered hostility and Paul was no exception. But hurtful though the *froideur* of resentful colleagues undoubtedly was, it was more than compensated for by the popularity he quickly acquired among students as a brilliant and unusually sympathetic teacher. Already in Cambridge, he was known for his meticulously prepared lectures and clear, engaging (and engaged) delivery. In Florence these qualities were appreciated even more by students who found him to be not only inspiring but also attentive and encouraging to them as individuals.

In Italy, Paul became a public figure. At a time of dramatic changes in the political sphere that included the Tangentopoli crisis, the collapse of the postwar party system,

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the transformation of the Communist Party and the emergence of Berlusconi, the views of the leading foreign expert on contemporary history were much sought after. He spoke widely at many public events, wrote for and gave interviews to newspapers and magazines, and appeared on television. With his measured tones, insightful analyses and transparent sympathy for reform, he became a leading light on the intellectual left. His outlook was broadly optimistic. His explanation of the crisis differed from that of those who had long been discussing the inevitable crisis of the republic. He opted for a multi-causal explanation that took account of a variety of spheres (economic and cultural as well as social and political) and different levels: long and short term, internal and external. It was the virtues, and not only the vices, of Italian society that contributed to the crisis. His prominence sometimes found him cast in strange company. Once, he was even a guest on a television talk show with Giulio Andreotti and Alberto Sordi (seeking to place the unfamiliar figure with the foreign accent who was sat next to him, the latter inquired of Paul on air, 'Scusi, ma Lei è francese?', perhaps confusing his surname with that of the French singer-songwriter Serge Gainsbourg).

The sudden rise to political power of the media magnate Silvio Berlusconi was an unexpected development that caused Paul to sharpen and intensify his focus on the present. In 2003 he published his follow-up to his earlier history, *Italy and Its Discontents, 1980-2001* (also for Penguin, with Einaudi once more publishing the Italian version). As the title suggested, it was less a straightforward work of history than a reflection on a complex set of problems and unresolved conflicts. As the introduction stated, it was 'part history, part political argument, part participant observation'. It identified a series of structural deficits in Italian democracy, which ranged from the 'inadequacy and cultural poverty' of the political system to criminality, clientelism and corruption while finding cause for hope in the growth of a critical middle class and of a democratic culture. More decisively than before, the family became a focus of analysis, along with culture and consumption, civil society and Europe. The book reflected a life-long commitment to looking at society from the bottom up. In conclusion, its author asserted that 'the strength of a democracy does not depend only upon the capability and integrity of its ruling elite, but also upon the culture of its families and the energy of its citizens'.

Inevitably, the figure of Berlusconi loomed large in Paul's work and it can be said that his 'counter-revolution' caused him to pay more attention to the mass media, sport and popular culture than had been the case before. In the dedicated volume, *Silvio Berlusconi: Television, Power and Patrimony* (2005), he developed an interpretation of his rise that hinged on a view of the man as a mixture of old, even of the archaic, and the new. It was in the alchemical combination of many elements that a powerful project for hegemony was born. In 2011, he returned to the topic with a collection of essays co-edited with Enrica Asquer, *Berlusconismo: analisi di un sistema di potere* that developed the notion of 'proprietorial dictatorship', first formulated by Paolo Flores d'Arcais.

The early 2000s were a period of great civil and political engagement on Paul's part, that was marked by a detachment from the mainstream left in favour of the sort of grass roots activism he had long found more congenial. In his first period in Italy, he had become radicalised and was aligned with Avanguardia operaia, one of the groupings born out of the social conflicts of 1968-69. In York he was involved with the International Socialists (later the Socialist Workers Party). Later, he was drawn more, though never uncritically, to the Italian Communist Party. His essay on Enrico Berlinguer, published after the latter's death in 1984 in the *London Review of Books*, testified both to his admiration for the late leader's rigour and to his criticism of his embrace of the politics of austerity and failure to grasp the transformations of contemporary society. The birth of the Partito Democratico della Sinistra entailed a serious review of the legacy of Italian Communism and its possible uses at a time when there was pressure for the left to become

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more avowedly reformist. This gave rise to a celebrated public debate in 1994 between Ginsborg and Massimo D'Alema, a shortened version of which was published in *Berlinguer*, a volume edited by Michele Battini. After this, it seemed for a while as though Paul might have been drawn into institutional politics. Following his acquisition of Italian citizenship, there was even talk of him being put up for Parliament by the PDS. Instead, he threw his lot in with the grass roots citizens' movement known as the Girotondi, of which he became an intellectual luminary. Formed in 2002 as a public demonstration of support for democracy and legality at a time when both appeared to be under threat, the movement, which spread to several major cities, was highly critical of the established left's insufficiently critical stance towards Berlusconi and his lack of respect for liberal democratic values. Born with the aim of defending the justice system and the action of judges against corruption, the movement drew tens of thousands of people to its demonstrations and won the backing of such prominent individuals as Nanni Moretti and Dario Fo. Paul threw himself into the movement's Florentine incarnation, one of the high points of which was a March on 24 January of some 15,000 people despite the heavy rain in defence of 'democracy in danger'. One of the movement's leaders in the city and beyond, together with Francesco 'Pancho' Pardi, Paul actively championed the very rebirth of civil society that he had identified and lauded in his books. He was especially gratified by the support of the veteran anti-fascist and trade unionist Vittorio Foa, a man who he greatly respected and whose friendship he valued. The documentary film *Ragioni politiche: incontro con Vittorio Foa* (2000), to which he contributed and which was directed by Giuseppe Bertolucci, was shown at the 2021 ASMI conference at his express request.

The season of the Girotondi was intense but brief. By refusing to adopt any formal structures or organisation, the movement avoided the risk of evolving into yet another party, but not that of withering once the initial energies sapped. The attempt to find a point of crystallisation in the leadership of the one-time leader of the CGIL Sergio Cofferati never really took off and Cofferati himself was induced to stand for mayor of Bologna by the Partito Democratico. In the aftermath of this season of engagement, Ginsborg authored several short books that looked not to the past but to the future in a remarkable effort to draw attention to the way everyday choices impacted on the well-being of the collectivity. Building a better but possible future was the project that informed *The Politics of Everyday Life* (2005), *La democrazia che non c'e'* (2006), *Salviamo l'Italia* (2010) and *Passioni e politica* (with Sergio Labate, 2016).

No matter how pressing present concerns were, and despite the numerous claims on his time, Paul was always eager to return to his studies. Indeed, he sometimes recommended that others use a genuine excuse that he deployed on occasion to decline invitations: 'Sorry, I would like to help, but I have a book to finish'. He could often be found in the 'Sala Storia' of the reading rooms of the Biblioteca Nazionale in Florence, an institution he loved despite the occasional frustrations of working there. He was greatly pleased when his books joined the classic works that were displayed on open shelves. Perhaps not surprisingly, the library itself at a certain point became the object of protest on the part of an association of regular readers of which Paul was a leading member.

Paul attracted intense loyalty from his doctoral students. In Cambridge, he supervised myself, the late David Travis, Lucy Riall, John Foot, Simon Parker and Martin Brown. He was an exacting supervisor who demanded high standards and respect for deadlines. In my first year, I recall not being allowed to go home for Christmas until I had handed in an overdue piece of work (I finally delivered it to his house on 24 December). He could also be waspish in his views of historians who he thought lacked professionalism ('charlatan' was a term he reserved for the worst offenders). But he was extraordinarily inspiring and humane. He regarded us all with affection and most of us became close friends. He always took an interest in us as people and enjoyed getting to know our

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partners and families. In Florence he never became a powerful university figure (a so-called *barone*) who could make the careers of his students. Yet he found talented pupils, including Stefania Bernini, Giovanni Focardi, Sofia Serenelli, Marta Bonsanti, Enrico Acciai and Enrica Asquer, who benefitted from his learning and his intense engagement with Italian and European history. Few who knew him cannot have been struck by his soft, seductive voice and gentle smile. Always curious and possessed of considerable personal charm, he knew how to look and listen; putting people at ease, showing them respect and treating them with kindness were all characteristics that made a lasting impression.

For all his increasing focus on the present, Paul remained passionately invested in the study of the Risorgimento and he was active in promoting the revival of the historiography of Italian nationalism that blossomed in the early 2000s. In a preface to a new edition of his first book on the Venetian revolution of 1848, he distanced himself from the Marxist approach he had embraced at the time, suggesting that Gramsci's original interpretation of Italian nation-building required correction. In 2007 he co-edited with Alberto Mario Banti a volume of the prestigious Einaudi Annali series dedicated to the Risorgimento in which new approaches and research questions found full citizenship. Liberalism, internationalism and the emotions formed elements within a cultural history perspective that accorded pride of place to Romanticism. The two historians were united in seeing the patriotic movement as a cultural revolution that was driven by an idea of the nation founded on family and biological bonds.

The family would figure prominently in Paul's last major book that saw him take on the ambitious project of studying different social and political configurations of the family in five European countries. *Family Politics: Domestic Life, Devastation and Survival, 1900-1950* (2014). Far more than the culmination of a longstanding interest in the family, the book offered a new perspective on key moments of transition in European history, ranging from the Russian revolution and the formation of the modern republic in Turkey to the rise of Nazism in Germany and the Spanish civil war. It was the only occasion on with he engaged directly with the history of the Fascist regime. It explores the effects of political upheaval and radical social policies on family life but also, crucially, the impact of families on the historical process itself. Families were not passive but rather active agents in political change. As with previous works, *Family Politics* was concerned with large questions and epochal changes, but it was also attentive to human and personal elements, to individual family histories and case studies.

As a Jew, Paul had encountered some discrimination in England, notably in the unofficial quota system that St Paul's adopted in its admissions policy. He confided to friends that he felt more at home in Italy. Many of his oldest friends, who included Luigi Bobbio, Andrea Ginzburg, Piero Brunello, Marcello Flores, Giovanni Contini and Michele Battini had also been political activists in Italy in the late 1960s and 1970s. Yet he remained in many respects very English. Fond of tea, biscuits, fountain pens and tweed jackets of the sort sold by the Cambridge men's outfitters Ede and Ravenscroft, which he generally wore over a round neck woollen jumper, he could have been mistaken by those who did not know him better for a typical denizen of a senior common room. But Paul was neither a dispassionate scholar nor, still less, a college type; he was an engaged intellectual in the fullest sense of the term, a man who lived the past as he lived his time, with a sense of purpose and faith in change. Yet he appreciated the privileges that Cambridge life afforded him and, almost every summer, he would return to there with his wife, the Turkish specialist and academic Ayşe Saraçgil, to enjoy the peaceful atmosphere of the University Library and the company of old friends like John Barber. However, Florence was the centre not only of his professional life but also his personal one. His children Ben and Lisa both grew up largely in Florence, where their mother

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had moved after she and Paul separated. To his great satisfaction, both Lisa and David, the son he and Ayşe had together, returned to settle in the city after studying in the UK.

Paul worked hard, at times perhaps too hard, committing all his energies and more to finishing his books and taking on additional roles that his fame brought his way. Yet he always reserved time for some pleasures, which included cricket, opera and mushroom foraging. Down time was often spent at the much-loved retreat in the Tuscan countryside in Vinca, where he and Ayşe had restored an abandoned village home. Paul's final years were marred by a long illness, which he bore stoically and which did not prevent him from taking the lead in organising the annual conference in 2017 on the theme of the family or accepting the post of ASMI president. Despite failing health, he was, until shortly before his death, still working on the successor volume to *Family Politics*. The many friends, comrades and former students who assembled for his secular funeral in Florence on 14 May testified to the respect he commanded but also – and, it might be said, mainly - to the great affection with which he was widely regarded.

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