

## **Nichi Vendola: For the New 'Laboratory' of the Italian Left**

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*Abstract.* This paper analyses the re-composition of part of the Italian left following the 2008 national elections, when its more radical faction was excluded from Parliament for the first time in the Republic's history. The study concentrates particularly on the 'laboratory' of 'Sinistra Ecologia e Libertà', a specific type of 'movement-party', founded and led by Nichi Vendola after his defeat at the Chianciano Congress of July 2008 and his subsequent exit from Rifondazione Comunista. After providing a brief biography of the man, the article examines Vendola's leadership style and his attempt to build a 'new' Italian Left.

Keywords: Nichi Vendola, personalisation of politics, movement-party, Italian Left

At the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, Italian progressives underwent an intense period of internal reorganisation thanks to the centre left's defeat at the 2008 general election. This provoked a profound identity crisis on the part of the 'radical' left, excluded from parliamentary representation in the sixteenth Republican legislature. During this period, following birth of the Partito Democratico (Democratic Party, PD), formed to unite former Communists and Christian Democrats, an alternative political project emerged on the centre left, yet another effort to rewrite the reformist programme. This unprecedented effort to restructure the Italian left was led by Nichi Vendola who said in an interview in February 2011:

we need to construct a new centre left and to open immediately a laboratory, that of a programmatic search that confronts the key questions of the current passage of epochs. In a programmatic laboratory we need to find shared answers on the decisive ground of the redistribution of wealth and the war on poverty [...]. I want to talk about Italy, about its crisis, its pain, its hopes [and for this reason I'm interested in speaking] with all those who are willing to put forward an alternative programme based on the pre-eminence of the public good, on the defence of labour understood not as a commodity, on investment

in culture and in public education, on the social war against male chauvinism and its pathetic public performances (*Il Manifesto*, 6 February 2011).

In these few lines the distinctive traits of the Italian left's new 'laboratory' can be seen. In what follows, we will attempt to illustrate the salient features of this political project, its context, the various ideas put forward, and its limits and opportunities. To understand fully the 'otherness' of the scenario drawn, one must start with a biography of the person who, because of his unconventional political and personal background, personifies the essence of the proposal itself.

### **Nichi Vendola: A brief biography of a leader**

Nicola Vendola was born on 26 August 1958 in Terlizzi, in the province of Bari, of a middle class southern Italian family. From the time he was a child 'Nichi' was exposed to two complementary and in some respects opposite identities, communist and Catholic, which in later years would characterise his personality. "At home", said Vendola, "I remember two portraits hanging side by side, that of Yuri Gagarin, the first man to orbit in space, and that of Pope John XXIII, the good, revolutionary pope of the Second Vatican Council" (in Rossi, 2010a: 44). Family and strong ties with his birthplace would later be an important part of his private and political life: "I have always seen my family", he declared, "as being a bit like a novel by Gabriel Garcia Marquez or Isabel Allende: as a great epic made up of stories, of narrations, of voices that re-emerge from memories" (ibid.).

Vendola became involved in politics thanks to his father who, although not attempting to influence his son's education, ended up having a considerable impact on him. "Handsome and strong as an oak", his father in 1940 left for the war a fascist and returned a communist. The horror of the front lines and the death of a brother, killed in a submarine, pushed his family towards a profound pacifism which would never leave them. The farmhands of the Terlizzi section of the Partito Comunista Italiano (Italian Communist Party, PCI), the trade-union leaders and, not least, the elderly he conversed with as a child in the streets of his village would also contribute to the political socialisation of the young Nichi. In 1972 Vendola enrolled in the Federazione giovanile dei comunisti italiani (Italian Communist Youth Federation, FGCI), the youth section of the PCI. He crossed the threshold of Botteghe Oscure, the historic headquarters of the party, for the first time in March 1984, for the funeral of Enrico Berlinguer, "with more trepidation than the first time I set foot inside St. Peter's Cathedral" he later recalled (in Rossi, 2010a: 78). As a politically involved young intellectual, he lived a predominantly provincial life until March 1985, when, not yet twenty-seven years old, with a degree in Literature and

Philosophy and a thesis on Pier Paolo Pasolini to his credit, he joined the FGCI national council. In February 1985, a few days before his FGCI nomination, in a speech at a convention in Naples, Vendola presented a political 'grammar' which revealed the extent of his personal commitment and the maturation of his own conception of political militancy:

the years that we are living through, the years that are being lived through us, appear faster because the rhythms of development are more rapid, the rhythms with which our individual destinies unfold are more hurried. With dizzying speed old and new scenarios overlap, unprecedented horizons come into view, contradictions entangle [...]. We must 'play' our identity in the field. On the wall of a grey building in Bari I read a phrase written in red paint in poor French, but its sense was unequivocal. From the nervous urban geography, among graffiti and Walkmans and livid neon lights and metallic solitude, straight into my brain and, I hope, into your brain: That phrase was, 'With love, for communism' (in Telese, 2010: 81-86).

That early speech gives a glimpse of Vendola's rhetorical skill and his symbolic yet not abstract vision of politics. 'Vendolese', wrote Luca Telese (2010: 9), 'is a particular language: part Di Vittorio and part Montale, a bit literary and a bit populist'. Certainly language, words, the 'narration' of facts, and the ability to restore a dream to the younger generations, are among the man's main traits (Molledo and Palumbo, 2011). Although a child of the language of austerity, of rigorous rhetoric and political severity, Vendola has made profound innovations in communications, inserting an inescapable sentimental energy and building a linguistic architecture of figures drawn from literature and poetry, especially of Hispanic derivation. In this way, under a guise at once heretical and theist, he presents his double identity: always 'freely' communist and always 'freely' Christian. The same double nature that Vendola first used to introduce a third schism, homosexuality.

Homosexuality is a part of my schism from the two churches: from the communist church and from the Catholic Church. Because these two churches have certainly had in common the register of the double truth [...]. Homosexuality was a speech on my exit from power (in Rossi, 2010a: 67).

It was a homosexuality proposed and experienced for the first time in the Italian political sphere beyond any Christian sense of guilt: a sexual identity neither displayed nor hidden but lived as 'a hard core of [his] dignity' (ibid.).

In 1990, Nichi was nominated to the central committee of the PCI shortly before it was dissolved. He speaks of having seen within the halls of the PCI "not a nomenclature, but rather a conclave [...]. I mean a school of

minds. And a gymnasium of moderation, of passion tempered by culture. A place in which confrontations occurred with the violence of a Latin quotation" (in Rossi, 2010a: 78-79). In 1991 at the Rimini conference that marked the end of the PCI and the birth of the Partito Democratico della Sinistra (Democratic Party of the Left, PDS), Vendola contributed to the creation of the dissident faction and, in drafting the manifesto against the change decreed at the Bolognina Convention ('Dear PCI, I do not understand and I will not fall in line'), contributed to the movement that would lead to the constitution of the Partito della Rifondazione Comunista (Party of the Communist Refoundation, RC). In recalling those days, Vendola expressed himself unequivocally:

it was murder. That's how we suffered the death of the PCI. Because, although faced with the real tragedy of socialism and its collapse, the dissolution of the PCI was the simplest, most banal response [...]. It was an act of pure repression. In this way you no longer have the middle passage, the fundamental one, in which you critically take stock of what has happened, and you question yourself without safety nets about what (it) was. Therefore, from the need for elaboration and for sense Rifondazione was born (in Rossi, 2010a: 86).

Elected to Parliament for the first time in 1992 from the lists of RC, Vendola was nominated, first secretary, then vice-president and finally member of the anti-mafia commission, a mandate which he fulfilled with particular pride from 1994 to 2005. The appointment was recognition of his long-standing commitment to the war against the mafia, which he carried out in the name of his own political identity and his southern origins. Later he would recall that his stand against the mafia "began as a part of the path of a young communist from Southern Italy" (in Rossi, 2005: 84). His pursuit of this path in many battles throughout Southern Italy has caused him numerous personal difficulties: nearly twenty years after his appointment to the anti-mafia commission, Vendola still lives under police protection.

Up to this point, his is the résumé of an eclectic leader of the Italian Left, heretical and orthodox at the same time, but certainly 'radical' in the most profound sense of the term.<sup>1</sup> The 'turning point' in his political career came in April 2005. That year, opposed by a great part of the general staff of the Italian centre left, Vendola won the Puglia regional primaries to go on to win the elections for president of a region formerly governed by the centre right. He was reconfirmed in his post in the elections of March 2010. Administrators of a large Italian region, his government proposed an alternative model of development focussed on certain fundamental issues: youth, research, culture, energy, the environment and defence of the 'common good' (Ambrosi, 2011). With regard to the 'Apulian laboratory', Vendola asserts that:

our experience demonstrates that there is another route, another possible policy with respect to the conspiratorial non-interference of the right and the inertia of a centre left that turns its head away in order not to see. Not a third way, but the ordinary way of political intervention that does not abdicate its public function of managing and stimulating (in Rossi, 2010a: 38).

The term as governor and his ability to personalise political communications gave Vendola enormous national and international visibility.

Meanwhile a further, and relatively unexpected, revolution took place in his life. In July 2008, at the seventh RC congress in Chianciano, his “Manifesto for the Re-foundation,” aiming at a radical renewal of the party, was defeated by the resolution to reconstruct a “Communist Re-foundation in Motion,” led by former Minister Paolo Ferrero and supported by various elements of the party from the most moderate to the most radical (De Nardis, 2009). Shortly afterwards, the winning groups constituted yet another political ‘container’, called Federazione della Sinistra (Federation of the Left, FDS), with the aim of uniting with the Partito dei Comunisti Italiani (Party of Italian Communists, PdCI) those in RC who were not aligned with Vendola’s project.

After the events of Chianciano, Vendola left the party to head a movement called Movimento per la Sinistra (Movement for the Left) up until the constitution of Sinistra e libertà (the Left and Freedom), later called Sinistra ecologia e libertà (the Left, the Environment and Freedom, SEL).<sup>2</sup> He was joined by the part of RC closest to him and by many national party leaders; by the most progressive current of the reformist left that had not been channelled into the new-born PD; by part of the environmentalists and, initially, by some fragments from the infinite diaspora of the Italian Socialist Party. For Vendola this was an unprecedented challenge, the outcome of which no one could predict. It was a journey on open seas, a novel political experience that was both participatory and strongly built around Vendola’s personal leadership. Initially he founded and led a broad electoral alliance (which only during the first congress in Florence in October 2010 would become an organised party) with the goal of reforming the Italian left after the profound crisis of the beginning of the century. It is to this project that we now turn.

### **After the crisis, the long road of the Left**

The political and social transformations which took place in the ‘short century’ between 1914 and 1989 (Hobsbawm, 1994) profoundly changed the original project of the international left. In the thirty-odd years spanning the 1960s to the end of the twentieth century, throughout the capitalist world, the left witnessed a ‘progressive shift’ (Segatori, 1997) of

its historically given political 'content', while safeguarding its external 'container' (Sartori, 1982). According to Segatori (1997), in the first half of the twentieth century, socialist and communist parties – finding in a single social entity (the working class) the reason for claims based on the dualistic notion of exploiters and exploited – developed a position of credit with the rest of society, denying any form of political legitimisation of the bourgeois state. Parties of Bernsteinian-type social democracy, instead, built their political autonomy on the question of method, broadening their action to include all workers, not just the working class, and accepted, albeit with reservations, the framework of the liberal-democratic state. After the fall of the Berlin wall and the implosion of real socialism, the democratic left seemed to cast its nets even more widely, recognising as its constituents all the weak segments of society, legitimising its political activity on an exclusively ethical basis and defending the achievements of social welfare within the bourgeois state (ibid.).

Currently the debate about the choice of 'container' and of 'content' to assign to the political left is very heated and the questions under discussion are fairly numerous. Called upon to reflect on the future after the heavy defeat of the 'Rainbow Left' in 2008,<sup>3</sup> Fausto Bertinotti, former RC general secretary, professed himself convinced of the gravity and depth of the crisis and of the need to begin again. According to Bertinotti the task is a very lengthy one requiring coming to terms with "a world of ideas, passions and sentiments strong enough to break down the great conservative wall built in recent decades. And you cannot expect to do this by returning to the ideology of the golden age. In fact, you cannot remain in the twentieth century" (in Armeni, Bertinotti and Gagliardi, 2009: 227). Bertinotti concluded by quoting the Greek poet Costantino Kavafis: 'you have to hope that the road will be long'. For this reason he called for "the construction of a new anti-capitalist left [that can] accompany this undertaking and take from it the strength not to abandon the battleground, always more impervious but nevertheless necessary, of democracy, also of representative democracy" (ibid.) In conclusion, Bertinotti launched a different perspective for political action: in Italy and Europe the time had come to overcome the distinction between moderate left and radical left, in order to construct a single left, which could once again be the preferred instrument of the popular classes and the spearhead of social transformation. Here is where the original project of Vendola fits in, providing a new 'content' and a new 'container' for the left of the second millennium. Following and developing this line of reasoning, Vendola expressed the conviction that:

the left, which defines every shift to the right as reformism, today appears incapable of emerging from its paralysis of thought and action. The other left, which has entrapped itself in an affected antagonism, reciting a script of declamatory and inert anti-capitalism, appears

marginal and often picturesque [...]. It is a question [...] of reconstructing a “philosophy”, a political culture [...]. The tacticians have sunk in their own politicism. The custodians of orthodoxy guard tombs and contemplate memorial stones. Instead the left needs open spaces and oxygen (but the planet’s scarce oxygen also needs the left!). The pace of the reformist and the horizon of the revolutionary can prepare a new route that seeks to gather and sever the root of modern alienation in productive life and in the organisation of social reproduction (Vendola, 2011: 13).

In the attempt to provide political representation for the demand for change that distinguishes the onset of the third millennium, for Vendola reformism and the culture of progressive radicalism alone are inadequate to govern the complex passing of the century, marked by a progressive alteration of spatial-temporal boundaries guided by the neo-liberal ideology of international globalism, by revolutions in telecommunications and computer technology, by greater precariousness of the ecosystem, by increased vulnerability of cities and urban spaces, by global de-structuring of labour-market rules and of workers’ rights. Following all of these transformations, a part of the Italian left is convinced of the need to create a novel progressive front. The challenge is oriented toward the construction of a centre left ‘without a stiff neck’ and ‘nostalgic only for the future’, able to give voice to the demand for change coming from numerous sectors of society and to overcome the ideological inheritance of the past century and the fragmentation within the left. Its final objective is the foundation of a different political subject and, with it, a different instrument of collective action. The idea is that of a left outside of the box, equal to the struggles of the third millennium without “becoming an identity left opposing another identity left” (in Cosentino and Rosciarelli, 2010: 33).

Aside from judgments of merit, this operation seems to lend itself to certain analytical considerations, first of all with regard to the potential success of the project and then regarding the limits of this potential. With regard to the first point, Ernesto Galli della Loggia appears to have got to the heart of the discussion. While critical of Vendola’s project for the re-composition of the left, he considers its success a possibility, citing in favour of this unprecedented ‘laboratory’ of the Italian left a sort of Fukuyamian ‘*end of history*’ as essential reference term and its substitution with *life*’ (*Corriere della Sera*, 21 December 2010). By this Galli della Loggia means that, after the splintering of the Italian political scene following the disbandment, of the PCI and the definitive disappearance of the parties of the First Republic ‘the idea that history would be the truest dimension of the existence of men has also declined definitively because it would be the key to their subjectivity, and therefore history would always be the cause of and at the same time the solution to their problems’ (ibid.) According to the Italian historian, with Vendola we definitively witness the passing of

ancient 'ideological moorings' to the 'sea of life' (ibid.) The end of mass parties and the decline of 'real-socialist' regimes would allow Vendola, in this precise historical situation and in his renewed institutional role, to cut loose from the ideological edifications of the last century to create an unprecedented political platform. According to Angelo Panebianco the strength of the 'laboratories' of the new Italian left lies at two different functional levels: on one hand, a rediscovery of the art of political rhetoric, 'narration', poetry, and 'speeches about love', which could appeal to the younger generations and a large part of the population that is turned off by politics and voting; on the other, the reference to an up-dated anti-capitalism which could legitimately be expected as an alternative political proposal (*Corriere della Sera*, 20 February 2011).

However, the minority position from which this experiment issues could prove a limit. Hypothetically, a re-composition of the left would seem more probable if pursued by its largest component. Starting from a position of political-electoral minority to propose an operation whose difficulty is proportional to the degree of variety of the forces involved would be a highly complex challenge. For this reason Vendola has insisted on coalition primary elections, since only with legitimisation from the base can he present himself as the best interpreter of the 'sentimental connection' of the whole population of the centre left. Such a manoeuvre, however, exposes him to strong criticism. Eugenio Scalfari, a particularly acute observer, has attempted to expose the contradictions within Vendola's project (*La Repubblica*, 19 September 2010). According to Scalfari, 'Vendola wants to break up [...] all the parties [of the centre left] and with the fragments strewn on the ground construct the Italian left - the left, not reformism - around himself' (ibid.) For Scalfari, Vendola's project, because it comes from the minority of a hypothetically broader left formation, would lose credibility because of its radical position and would be oriented more toward rebuilding the left axis of Italian reformism than that of the entire centre left.

At this point, having outlined the strategic positioning of the new political subject, it only remains for us to bring into focus the proposal revolving around the figure of Vendola and the organisational prospects of this project.

### **Movement party: The case of Sinistra ecologia e libertà and Nichi's Factories**

The years straddling the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have seen the emergence, in Italy and Europe, of another type of political organisation, alongside the 'personal party' (Calise, 2000) and the 'business party' (Hopkin and Paolucci, 1999): the so-called movement party (Gunther and Diamond, 2001). This term implies a loosely structured entity of the kind



typical both of 'left libertarian' (Kitschelt, 1988) and ecologist parties, and of the 'post-industrial parties of the extreme right' (Ignazi, 1994). The movement party is a specific type of political organisation half way between a party and a social movement, one which, although fielding candidates at elections and assuming thereby the role of a real political party, continues to maintain the distinctive traits of the social movements (Gunther and Diamond, 2001). The emergence and growth of such new types of party can be explained by the declining significance of the traditional cleavages identified by Lipset and Rokkan (1967) and by the change in the nature of social conflict. In particular, in the gestation phase of the movement parties, a crucial role was played by the development of 'post-material' values (Inglehart, 1977), generated in the youth and anti-authoritarian movements of the 1960s and 1970s, values which go beyond traditional divisions based essentially on economic concerns. This situation is one that reflects the division between materialism and post-materialism, arising following the reduction of conflicts based on the old nineteenth- and twentieth-century cleavages identified by Lipset and Rokkan (1967), and the social transformations of the globalised age. The movement parties have emerged, therefore, from the electorate's dissatisfaction with the typical institutions of indirect democracy and with the mechanisms of organised representation in traditional parties. The objective of this singular form of political mobilisation is to stimulate greater participation through the direct involvement of all stakeholders interested in the outcomes of decision-making processes (Massari, 2004). Left libertarian parties, as movement parties, are qualified for the exercise of non-conventional politics, whose success depends not solely on election results, but also on their ability to win active support for their positions in society.

In Italy, Vendola's new-born party, SEL, is a very close example of this kind of political organisation. In his inaugural speech at the party's founding congress he said he had:

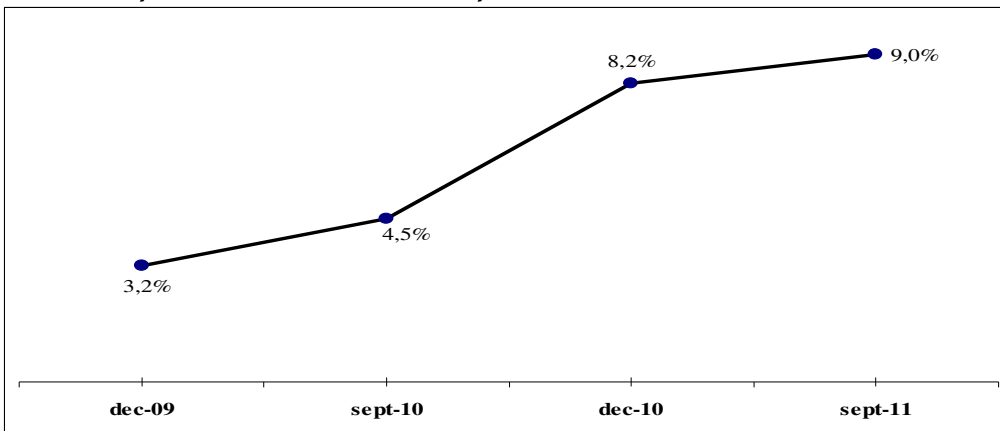
created a party which, unlike all the others, hopes to remain alive only for the time necessary and which in its DNA has inscribed not the survival instinct but a leaning towards the birth of something greater, which contains it and surpasses it: a seed whose mission is not accomplished in itself but which lies in the growth of the tree (Vendola, 2010: 17).

Vendola's message is clear: from the start, SEL sought to distance itself from the conventional types of political organisation, to assume an unusual role with respect to the past. From this point of view, the message is remarkable, yet consistent with the project to be pursued: on the opening day of the constituent congress, the party's founder and leader *in pectore* invoked its political death. In the view of its main exponent, SEL represents nothing other than a transition towards the construction of a new political

project, and in this respect ‘we must be prepared not to fall in love with the party as a fetish, but to treat it as an instrument’ (Vendola, 2010: 61). With these words the experiment of SEL distinguished itself from the beginning, for its orientation towards creating an unprecedented protagonist of the Italian political system. Meanwhile in the space of a few months, Vendola’s party, which at its first sortie in the European elections of 2009 had achieved only modest results, seemed to gain considerable strength.

Support for Vendola’s party increased progressively from December 2009 to September 2011. Moving from a figure slightly above three per cent, SEL gained the support of 4.5 per cent in polls carried out in October 2010, then exceeded eight per cent in January 2011.<sup>4</sup> In September of the same year, support for SEL had grown to nine per cent.<sup>5</sup> Graph 1 represents the trend in support for SEL over the period examined. The electoral progress of SEL can be explained by various factors, primarily its markedly personalised politics, especially Vendola’s leadership and his cultured public language which, thanks to the instruments, old and new, of mass communications (television, radio, newspapers, public rallies, social networks and Internet blogs), seems to have given totally unexpected results. On the other hand, the growth of SEL demonstrates that: 1) in Italy there is a ‘social’ left which, although excluded from Parliament in the 2008 elections, tends to group around a single political entity and which could thus foster the consolidation of Vendola’s party;<sup>6</sup> 2) the difficulties within the centre left, and the PD in particular, have helped the growth of a leftist party able to pursue a hegemonic political strategy within the progressive formation, based on a clear programme of government and an undisputed leader; 3) Vendola’s project seems attractive to a significant number of voters who, following the demise of the First Republic, clamour for unification of the forces of the left.

*Figure 1: Support for Sinistra Ecologia e Libertà according to voting intention polls (December 2009 - September 2011)*



Source: Istituto Demopolis, 1 February 2011; Ipsos, 3 October 2011.

Obviously, the growing 'personalisation' of politics generally has, besides favouring the growth of SEL, also had an effect on Vendola's personal popularity rating. In a survey conducted in February 2011 by the Istituto Demopolis, his ratings reached 46 per cent nationally,<sup>7</sup> a figure which grew to 55 per cent among the under-35s. The reasons given by respondents for their choice were: Vendola's charismatic leadership (67 per cent), the highly innovative nature of his politics (55 per cent), his substantial technical competence in solving day-to-day problems (51 per cent) and his decisiveness in dealing with urgent matters (42 per cent).<sup>8</sup>

However, an inevitable question arises about SEL's political prospects. If, that is, the consolidation of SEL both locally and nationally should continue in the medium-to-long term, backed by good election results, in what direction might the party evolve when faced with demands for greater organisational structuring? If, following possible internal strengthening, SEL should undergo a process of bureaucratisation and acquire a more clearly defined executive class, what changes might there be in the light party set up by Vendola? The external observer is hard put to respond to these questions because it is difficult to say whether greater structuring of the party is an objective that is sought – or whether its growth is to be seen as the risk of a return to discarded methods of political organisation neither sought nor anticipated by the project itself. From this point of view, it cannot be denied that an important part of the party itself (especially that connected with the former DS current) is fighting from within for greater organisational growth. This derives from the conviction that a virtuous acceleration of democratic regimes and a return to closer relations between institutions and citizens can more easily be achieved within the 'container' of traditional forms of political organisation than in the unpredictable evolution of yet another transformation.

While no hypothesis can be formulated regarding the immediate prospects for the Italian left's new project, it is possible to connect an analysis of SEL with that of a second instrument in the hands of its leader. Alongside the party 'laboratories', in fact, Vendola has also cultivated additional structures, certainly more difficult to describe, but light by definition. These are the so-called 'Factories of Nichi', created with the explicit intent of revolutionising traditional methods of political mobilisation and appealing mainly to the younger 'digital generation' (Palfrey and Gasser, 2008), who find in the Internet a vehicle for novel forms of participation.

We shall try to explain what these unusual 'forges' of political participation are, beginning with an analysis of the terminology. The Factories, inaugurated in the initial phase of the campaign for the 2010 regional elections, have been connected from the beginning with the name of their founder, even though, with an effective play on words, it has been affirmed that 'The factory (of) Nichi – in which *of* is not a preposition to

indicate possession but rather a complement of origin – is not the search for a leader, but the origin of an alternative narration’ (Vendola and La Fabbrica di Nichi, 2011: 176). The language is typical of Vendola, but the question should be gone into in greater depth, in an attempt to summarise the original project, that underway, and the criticism directed toward it.

Let us begin with the record. Nichi’s Factories originated as ‘committees of purpose’ and opened formally on 15 November 2009. This coincided with the start of the regional election campaign and the need to communicate an early balance sheet of Vendola’s experience as governor, in an attempt to ‘gather ideas for the future of Puglia and [...]construct] a movement of popular participation, in defence of an experience of government’ (Vendola and La Fabbrica di Nichi, 2011: 172). The ultimate objective was Nichi’s re-election as president of Puglia at the end of his first term of office. The Factories began with the success of the 2005 regional election campaign, playing, however, a very different role as compared to the old electoral committees five years earlier.<sup>9</sup> Five years later it was decided to change the strategy paying greater attention to forms of multimedia communications. The rather innovative management of the Factories relied heavily on constant use of the Internet, of web 2.0 technology and of all its interactive platforms, in particular of social networks like Facebook and Twitter. In this context, ‘the thrust from below and the birth of activist communities generate[d] a new organisational form [...]. The Factory of Bari acts as a hub and, through the site, puts contents and activation instruments on-line, thus fostering relations’ (Vendola and La Fabbrica di Nichi, 2011: 173-4). At the end of the election campaign, throughout Puglia there were more than two hundred Factories which organised (on line and off) more than three hundred connected events.<sup>10</sup> On 29 March 2010, after winning the centre-left primaries, for the second time Vendola won the regional elections, was reconfirmed governor of Puglia and from the platform in Bari thanked the Factories for their contribution. In the meantime, rather than closing the ‘gates’ and firing the ‘workers’ after the goal had been reached, given their success and the internal crisis in which the Italian left and centre left found themselves, the Factories rejected the idea of their immediate dissolution and began to spread over the entire national territory, with the purpose of “reconnecting the best of our past with the best of our future, gathering together all those who believe that it’s time to try to really change this nation. For a better Italy” (Vendola and La Fabbrica di Nichi, 2011: 177). With this objective, in July 2010 the Factories organised their own “Estates General”, three days of intense discussions, in which more than two thousand persons from all over Italy participated, on the international financial crisis, the question of political participation and the political situation in Italy.

Regarding the Factories, if for Stefano Cristante (2010: 19) ‘a method of discussion that was competent and open to all was seen in action, inherited

from the social forums of the anti-globalisation movement and from the more mature experiences of active citizenship', for Onofrio Romano, the experience was a model of top-down and 'post-democratic' political organisation thanks to the hierarchical way in which decisions were made. Romano's criticism of the Factories goes even further to denounce 'a Caesar-like trait typical of the culture of the right transferred without embarrassment into the ranks of the left and which is incompatible with the basic ideology of the participants themselves' (Romano, 2009: 161). According to Romano, the Factories were places of open and participatory discussion, but within them no binding decisions were made, because the more restricted sphere of decision-making was jealously reserved for the higher political levels, directly controlled by the leader (Romano, 2011). According to Franco Cassano, the Factories, initially conceived as a means of going beyond traditional forms of party politics and, for this reason, oriented towards a progressive broadening of public discussion, had 'increasingly become places not of participation and the production of political decisions, but rather of the communication of these, a sort of press and propaganda section in the era of post-Fordism and the new media' (Cassano, 2011: XI). Much more moderate, instead, was the opinion of Carlo Formenti (2010) whose interpretation was essentially positive, while not ignoring the 'risks' of media populism that the Factories represented and the 'danger' of Americanisation that they could bring to Vendola's style of political campaigning.

Although they are two distinct things, the SEL project and the Factories do not lend themselves to a separate interpretation. In our opinion the Factories of Nichi, far from being an active subject within the Italian political system,<sup>11</sup> represent nothing more than an attempt to maintain citizen participation at a high level in a climate of 'permanent electoral campaigning' (Blumenthal, 1980). Substantially, the Factories seem to constitute a sort of backbone extended over the entire national territory, formed by a capillary network of sleeper cells perfectly tested and well trained for the election campaign, ready for action in case of compelling need. If political developments should lead to early elections, with coalition primaries to choose quickly the leader of the centre left, Vendola would have an immediate advantage over other candidates, thanks to this same light structure organised for the purpose.

The 'laboratories' of the new Italian left do not seem willing, therefore, to give up any politically available instruments. The strategy of the double track, one centred on the most innovative methods of political participation (the Factories), gives voice to highly heterogeneous forms of bottom-up mobilisation and is able to involve large portions of the population, especially young people, who would otherwise be politically inactive. The second track pays more attention to institutional dynamics through the construction of a new movement party (SEL), able to mediate between 'the

street' and the corridors of power, in an effort to connect the great need for participation with the pursuit of a general transformation of existing power relationships.

For that matter, the personalisation of politics also plays a fundamental role in the Italian political system. Although this remains an unavoidable phenomenon of contemporary politics, with which its protagonists must come to terms (Nye, 2008), it is unlikely to be the only way out of the crisis of traditional forms of representation, since it is closely tied to the general mechanisms for acquiring support and of participation expressed in the indirect form of representative democracy. In the specific case of the Italian left, Vendola's political style and his strong personal charisma could be seen as an attempt to construct a 'transformative' leadership (Burns, 1978), to bend the personal interests of individual citizens in favour of a project of general utility. According to Burns, transformative leadership differs from 'transactional' leadership, intent on motivating its supporters by appealing to their particular advantages, by the capacity to mobilise good energies for change, pursuing great ideals of renewal rather than the more instinctive emotions of its supporters (*ibid.*).

Increased social complexity, therefore, far from being governed only through legislative assemblies composed of hundreds of elected representatives, does not elude the figure of a 'Democratic prince' (Fabbrini, 1999), able to make decisions from among many possible choices and to unite various game players in a single political project. Sergio Fabbrini (2011: 42) maintains that 'leaders serve to construct the narration that provides a sense of belonging to citizens, as well as an orientation to public policies, since it is difficult to reach a decision in the presence not only of contrasting interests and visions but also of antithetical sentiments'. Nevertheless, according to Fabbrini, despite the party crises which have distinguished liberal democracies since the second half of the twentieth century, it is improbable that the personalisation of politics can perform, by itself, the tasks indicated without the help of the classical instruments of traditional mobilisation, since both leader and parties are necessary for the good government of democratic regimes. This is also valid, obviously, for the countries of continental Europe, but not all party models are useful for this purpose, nor are all types of leadership compatible with this objective (*ibid.*). The international challenge launched by Vendola's left takes shape from this. Starting with the 'transformative' nature impressed by its leader, it attempts to construct an original political option able to take advantage of the strong charismatic potential recognised in its leader, but at the same time striving to organise a variety of instruments of participation, in turn conceived as different but compatible devices of an articulated form of democratic mobilisation.

The gamble has just begun, but in the 'laboratory' of the Italian left, after years of strikes and work stoppages, the cranes seem to have started

up again, the workers have returned to work and the initial activity gives the customers new hope. At this point, interest is concentrated on the transformative methods of the evolving project, on the innovations within SEL and on the definition of the role assigned to the light structure of its political organisation.

### Notes in progress

In the immediate future, Vendola and his political party could, in our opinion, follow one of three paths, the first being the attempt to reconstruct a different political option which, starting from a minority position within the progressive formation, has the force to launch a hegemonic challenge to the parties of the centre left, to seek a complete reorganisation of the Italian political scene.<sup>12</sup> This is the option that Vendola himself has pursued since leaving RC, but in the short run is substantially limited to the option of the coalition primaries and could undergo a substantial redefinition should the dynamics of national politics evolve in a different direction from that desired by its promoters. In this first scenario, the laboratory of the social left suggests a general 'reshuffling' of the cards on the table and the disbanding of the subjects currently present in the formation of the centre left, hoping for a leading role in the subsequent re-composition of the political offer. This possibility was evoked during a long interview granted by Vendola after the success of the centre left in the 2011 administrative elections.<sup>13</sup> In this circumstance, the leader of SEL, despite provoking criticism within his own party, re-launched the idea of constructing a single force of the Italian left, encouraging his allies to break 'with the legacy of our biographies [to place ourselves] all in the open sea, to watch the new scene of politics because it is the scene of a new society' (*Corriere della Sera*, 8 June 2011). In September 2011, the renewal proposition of the Italian left laboratories, seemed to gel into the project for the 'New Olive Tree' which, based on the experience of the period between 1995 and 2007, proposed to unite the main forces of the centre left (SEL, PD and IdV) under the umbrella of a single political grouping (*Corriere della Sera*, 17 September 2011). This operation would seem oriented towards the constitution of a novel centre left which broadened to include all the progressive forces of the political system and of civil society, could represent an alternative in opposition to the centre right.<sup>14</sup>

The second possibility is the creation of a novel political subject to the left of the traditional parties of European social democracy, one that can work with the reformist forces for the government of the nation and for the administration of broad regions of the nation. In this case, the objective could be to seek a strategic relationship with moderate socialists in an attempt to tip the balance of an eventual coalition government towards the left. Should this possibility emerge, Vendola seems to have in mind a very

different 'container' than that classically conceived. In fact, his criticism of the parties, as 'cuttlefish bones, places full of rubbish, places without a soul' (in Ambrosi, 2011: 136), would seem to lead him, after many years spent as an exponent of the traditional structures of politics, in pursuit of a form of mass organisation, understood as a 'living body' totally permeable to social transformations and to the 'change that there is in the world'.

The third and last option contemplates, instead, the possibility of the definitive dissolution of the laboratories within a unitary centre left. Vendola would count on entering the directive bodies of the PD and attempting, from within, to form a political subject more similar to that described in the first scenario than to that currently represented by the PD. Although this last possibility is the least likely (at least in the short term), we have nevertheless included it because it has been pursued by a significant part of the reformist left itself with the aim of absorbing the project of the social left led by Vendola, defusing its potential and assimilating some of its reformist demands.

Beyond the possible future options, the problem which the 'laboratory' of the new Italian left will have soon to address concerns the organisational form of the project, as well as the type of change sought. The challenge is quite ambitious and regards the will to unite more structured methods of mobilisation with less traditional forms of participation and the mobilisation of support. Whatever the final outcome, there is a widespread conviction that the Italian left does not face 'a tranquil Spring; [it finds itself] faced with, as Weber said at the beginning of the 1920s, a cold, very harsh, winter in which everyone must assume heavy responsibilities' (Revelli, Dal Lago and Brancaccio, 2009: 51).

## Notes

1. In explaining the meaning of the term 'radical', during a rally Vendola told the audience: "remember that we are radicals [...] not because we aim toward the extreme, which is nothing, but because we dig down into the roots. We are radicals because we love to get to the bottom of things, of ideas and of passions: in depth: Radicals because we dig at the only point where values can be found" (in Telese, 2010: 14).

2. Vendola explained the party's name this way: "Left to bring the reality of the world of labour and precariousness back to the centre of attention. Ecology, because the impact of history requires us to conduct bio-politics, to construct the planet. Liberty, so that this word not be transformed into a mercantile attitude but that it be the real liberty of persons, of men and women" (in Cosentino and Rosciarelli, 2010: 35).

3. The Rainbow Left was formed in December 2007 to bring together all the parties of the Italian 'radical' left excluded from the process leading to the creation of the Democratic Party, that is: RC, the PdCI, the Greens, and Sinistra Democratica (the Democratic Left, SD).



4. *Istituto Demopolis*, survey published 1 February 2011.

5. *Istituto Ipsos*, survey published 3 October 2011.

6. To the left of SEL, the FDS, bringing together the majority of RC not aligned with Vendola's project, the PdCI, the 'Socialismo 2000' movement lead by Cesare Salvi and the association Lavoro-Solidarietà (Labour and Solidarity), coordinated by Gian Paolo Patta, obtained rather modest percentages: barely 1 per cent of the vote, according to *Istituto Demopolis* (February 2011). In October 2011, an Ipsos poll gave the FDS 1.4 per cent (October 2011).

7. The trend was also substantially confirmed, although in slight decline, by Ipsos in October 2011 when it gave Vendola a popularity rating of 41 per cent, placing him in first place among the politicians of the centre left.

8. *Istituto Demopolis* survey, 1 February 2011.

9. For a deeper understanding of the factors behind Vendola's first victory in the regional elections of Puglia in 2005, see Romano (2005), Rossi (2005) and Cristante and Mele (2006). The different political-organisational approach to the 2010 primaries (Cristante and Flore, 2010) did not depend solely on the fact that Vendola had, in the meantime, left RC, nor only on the scant territorial structuring of the new-born SEL party, but also because the election campaign only lasted two weeks, given the delay with which the leaders of the PD and the centre left called the elections.

10. In describing the environment which hosted the Factory of Bari during the electoral campaign of 2009 (the Factory of Bari is the 'Zero Factory', that is, the thinking head and pulsing heart of the entire network of the Factories of Nichi), Luca Telese (2010: 36) evokes a totally surreal image: 'a Spartan room decorated with recycled materials (coloured bottle tops to design the map of Puglia, cardboard cartons in place of furniture, a logo made with letters cut out of cloth), where every day thirty volunteers work [...]. There were only a few tables; average age twenty-five, each with his or her laptop, kids who were on line all day typing on Twitter and Facebook, updating the site, coordinating the Nichi-expresses, the buses bringing students wanting to vote in the primaries back to Puglia'. Those working in the Factories are 'ordinary persons belonging to various associative networks or motivated by a personal desire to participate [who] give life to a set of activities in support of the candidate, many of which appear to be innovative compared with the traditional campaigns of party subjects' (Cristante, 2010: 13).

11. The third of the eight approved rules of the Factories provides explicitly that 'Nichi's factory will not run for election and is not a new political party' (Vendola and La Fabbrica di Nichi, 2011: 178). For further information see the Factories' web site, at: <http://fabbrica.nichivendola.it>.

12. From this point of view, Vendola is very clear in his reasoning: "I cannot think that the construction of an alternative to the right would not see PD as one of the forces together with which to respond to the demand for a transfer of sovereignty, for example, through the primaries. But this is exactly the point. That is, that the primaries have proven an occasion for non-formal but substantial unity for the left" (in Rossi, 2010b: 109).

13. During the local and provincial elections in the Spring of 2011, the centre left made significant advances in a number of the areas involved in the voting. The success registered in Milan and Naples was particularly important, with the

victory of Giuliano Pisapia, a man very close to Nichi Vendola, and Luigi De Magistris, running with Italia dei Valori (Italy of Values, IdV).

14. This operation was opposed by Fausto Bertinotti who, after acting as the instigator and early supporter of the political option pursued in the SEL 'laboratory', disassociated himself from the project of the 'New Olive Tree', declaring it to be incompatible with the initial proposals for re-founding the Italian left.

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