

Thomas Jefferson, I dilemmi della democrazia americana, translated and edited by Alberto Giordano, with a preface by Dino Cofrancesco (Novi Ligure: Città del Silenzio, 2007)

On the contrary, the ruling political coalitions in the 1980s, centered on the two-prongs of the Christian Democracy and the Socialist parties, got rid of every sense of measure in spoiling public resources and making recourse to inflation and public debt - which, in those years, rocketed from a normal 60% of GNP to more than 100% (so that we, our daughters and sons, and a host of unpredictable future generations are, and will be, paying dearly for the glorious "statemanship" of those years). 1992 marked a turning-point for the old political establishment: the "Mani pulite" ("Clean Hands") trials, filed by independent public prosecutors in front of an independent judiciary sent a lot of politicians and fellow transactors and businessmen into jail, and even a former prime minister, acclaimed by somebody as one of the greatest Italian politicians of the XXth century, flew abroad to avoid prosecution. After a while, however, old politicians found a way for taking advantage of the wise advice of Fabrizio, the beloved nephew of Prince Salina ("It is necessary that everything does change for everything to stay as usual"). This way was the founding of a new political party by an influential businessman. This businessman won three elections in the last fifteen-years, qualifying as a perfect demagogue (his party is being defined by his followers as a "charismatic party"), and putting his own private interests on the top of government and parliamentary agendas. The public sphere deteriorated heavily in those years, and is still deteriorating, for the demagogue and his allies proceeded systematically to turn politics from a civil, though sometimes tough, confrontation of opinions among rival parties into a war against internal enemies, while at the same time undermining the foundations of the Republican Constitution.

In such a situation, the selection of eight writings and seventeen letters by Thomas Jefferson translated, edited, and clearly introduced by Alberto Giordano may indeed provide a sample of an ideal, good, politician, to be used as a standard for criticism and improvement in the Italian political life. For instance, Jefferson upheld free public education for all, as a way to provide future citizens with the learning necessary to control politicians and protect democracy; he opposed public debt, arguing that present generations have not the right to bind future generations to pay for it; he opposed religious "fanaticism", we would now say "fundamentalism", as one of the most serious dangers for a democracy, while upholding religious freedom and toleration, provided religion is properly considered as a *private business* of each believer.

Italians should take the Jefferson model, however, with two caveats.

To begin with, Jefferson supported a few, quite unpalatable, views, even for XVIIIth century standards: think about slavery (he was not an uncompromised abolitionist), women (their

Thomas Jefferson, I dilemmi della democrazia americana, translated and edited by Alberto Giordano, with a preface by Dino Cofrancesco (Novi Ligure: Città del Silenzio, 2007)

proper place is home and family management), and native Americans (to be civilized under the protectoship of wasps). But this is a minor drawback, from our point of view and the way society and culture have evolved in the meantime.

Furthermore - a point I consider the most serious flaw in Jefferson's political thought - he deemed democracy to be capable, by itself, to protect and guarantee to citizens the individual rights he wisely wanted to be ascribed to them in a constitutional Bill of Rights. On this path, we cannot follow him (though we may appreciate his romantic idea of a democracy made up by small businessmen, small farmers, and small manufacturers, with a small government to decide upon). Nay, democracy by itself is prone to become the prey and toy of demagogues; and only a firmly established constitutional democracy, endowed with a sovereign constitution and judicial review, like the one Madison and Marshall cherished, can do the tremendously important trick of a serious protection of individual rights against abusing majorities and the interest-groups pulling its wires. So, to conclude: welcome to Jefferson's essays, but, as Don Ferrante suggests, *con juicio*. The book also contains a learned "Preface" by Dino Cofrancesco, where the most recent essays on Jefferson are analyzed and discussed.

Share this:

- [Share](#)