



by Vittorio Borelli

EDITORIAL

In the 1930s, the American middle class faced up to the Great Depression with the dogged spirit of a maintenance man trying to fix the faults and correct the defects of a malfunctioning machine. It did so by introducing major reforms of the system and (sometimes brutally) suppressing trade unions and leftwing organisations that appeared to want to position themselves outside or against the system. The European bourgeoisie, which was being pressured by a far stronger and politically aware workers' movement than America's, thought it had found the solution in Nazism and Fascism: apolitical State capitalism quite similar to the Soviet model. Fortunately, they only succeeded in Germany, Italy and Spain. The end of World War II swept away Nazism, Fascism and other such nationalisms and opened the way for internationalization and subsequently globalization. Finally, in 1989 the fall of the Berlin Wall led to the collapse of the last palingenetic illusions about Communism. From then on, the crisis of 20th century political ideologies was no longer a theoretical assumption: it was a fact. But it took nearly twenty years before it became evident to one and all that the "short century", as Eric J. Hobsbawm described it, was over. Two recent events have verified this: the way in which the crisis sparked by the subprime loans has been faced and handled, and the election of Barack Obama as President of the United States.

**The crisis.** The generally held view is that the crisis was not the result of an intrinsically flawed development model but rather of its degeneration. George Soros, who can hardly be suspected of Communist sympathies, maintains that capitalism



physically produces speculative bubbles that distance the price of commodities from their real underlying values. However, he adds, we have to be watchful and set limits to ensure that the physical does not turn pathological. If the issue is being discussed here it is obviously because limits, regulations and controls, i.e. the authorities, principally the American authorities, did not function. But when they found themselves with their backs against the wall, the Americans reacted as speedily and pragmatically as they had done in the previous century. They nationalised some banks and injected hefty amounts of public

\_The Americans reacted to the crisis speedily and pragmatically, nationalising some banks and injecting hefty amounts of public capital into the economy. In the wake of the U.S., the U.K. led by the Labour Party's Gordon Brown, France's *laissez-faire* Sarkozy and Germany's Christian Democrat Angela Merkel did likewise



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capital into the economy: an amazing response viewed through the prism of the old ideologies, for which (having mixed up democracy and laissez faire), the latter is an end in itself and not the most efficient way to make capitalism work under “normal” conditions.

The amazement peaked when, in the wake of the U.S., the U.K. led by the Labour Party’s Gordon Brown, France’s laissez-faire Sarkozy and Germany’s Christian Democrat Angela Merkel did likewise. A few blunders aside – a free-ranging Vice Presidential candidate in the U.S., Europe’s residual Communist fringe and a few improvised rightwing elements in Italy – it did not occur to anyone to accuse the world’s leaders of wanting to destroy capitalism, least of all the Russians and the Chinese, notwithstanding their substantial expertise in the matter: or perhaps precisely because of it.

**Obama.** American blue collars and Chicanos would have preferred Hillary Clinton, not Barack Obama. Neither discouraged nor moved, he carried straight on, proposing a therapy with many elements that could also be shared by Republicans. He also, however, added his own ideas: outlawing any discrimination based on race, ethnic origin or religion; calling on young people to participate, recalling American society’s constituent values of freedom and distancing himself from the pressure of Washington’s financial lobbies. More Internet – once again, all goods that cannot be classified within the 20th century categories of right and left, conservatives and progressives, statist and pro-laissez faire etc.

In one fell swoop, Obama made the cultural and political background that makes up the ruling classes in most of the world seem outdated. He is not only the first leader of a globalisation in absolute need of governance; he is also, and above all, the first post-ideological leader of the new

millennium. In a certain sense, so are the post-Communist Vladimir Putin and Hu Jintao, but there is a major difference: Obama was first chosen and then elected in a clearly democratic way, whereas the other two were simply elected. This is also why he is the only expendable leader at the global level.

The end of 20th century ideologies clears the field of unusable dross and debris but is not yet the solution to problems. It could restart the blocked mechanism of globalisation on a more rational (less debt and more capital) and more equitable basis (greater attention to people and their needs). In sum, it could have a snowball effect. But it cannot wipe out the major differences – of wealth, knowledge and rights – that exist in the globalised world. History continues. The old ideologies are being replaced with new ones, possibly borrowed from religions, as Islamic fundamentalism above all shows, but also Hinduism (see the article on the hunting down of Christians in Orissa, India) and Catholic-Christianity, with its pretext of reducing the ethics of our time to a sole Catholic-Christian variety. The old expansionist and militaristic nationalisms are being replaced by nationalisms that are reflexive, self-governing, on ethnic grounds, *à la carte*.

Obama's victory may not be a solution, but it does indicate a method: one which makes it possible to combine principles and pragmatism, vision and realism, human rights and material living conditions, public ethics and private morals. It is a victory of secularism over dogmatism and superstitions, both old and new.

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