

*MODUS IN REBUS:*

EROS, POLITICS, AND MODESTY

EDITORIAL

It is not moralism when we remark that, in the case of politicians, an evident absence of modesty or shame in the private sphere tends to indicate a lack of sense of limits, that is, of reality, which can be easily accompanied with an arrogant and tyrannical attitude. This is at least what Plato thinks in *Republic*, book 10, when, in an impressive picture of politics and ethics, he warns against desire's infringement of all boundaries, which prepares for tyranny. There is a link between tyranny and *eros*, which Plato expresses in the synthetic formulation "tyrant *eros*" (*Rep.* 573d4).

One could think, however, that modesty and shame are only one mode. What matters is that a politician governs well. Such a scission between mode and thing is not convincing though.

The connection, certainly not to be taken for granted, between the vertiginous decline in the general esteem of the sense of modesty or shame and the lack of trustworthiness on the international scenario has found a symbolic expression, in Italy, in the decadent atmosphere of the most recent years that has proceeded in parallel with the increase in the economic spread. All of a sudden what was not evident just a little earlier has become apparent, namely that one cannot recover the thing—trustworthiness—without revising the mode. The idea that the mode, the style, may not correspond to the thing has revealed itself illusory, at least for now.

The so-called Italian Third Republic, that is, the overcoming of the Berlusconi era, seems to be born under the sign of modesty (which also exposes it to the danger of hypocrisy given that modesty can be hypocritical). In truth, however, it is plausible to think that a minority would indeed prefer to continue an immodest way on condition that such immodesty were to be the counterpart of a reality of economic wealth and flourishing.

It is not the mode of immodesty and shamelessness that has been defeated, then; rather, it is the economic crisis that has rendered such a mode no longer proposable. The end of an illusion is not necessarily the mark of a recovered love of reality. On the contrary, if reality has no other operational modes than those of harshness and despair, the concrete risk emerges that the correction of reality, or the straightening up of the finances, becomes precisely the path to retrieve as quickly as possible the mode that has just been lost, or something similar to it.

The mode of the Italian First Republic (that is, of the political institutions up to the collapse of the traditional Italian parties in the early nineties) was hypocrisy—the very curial mode of saying one thing and doing something completely other. Immodesty and shamelessness, inaugurated already at the end of such a period and then systematically employed during the Second Republic, that is, the Berlusconi era, could appear as forms of liberation from hypocrisy. In fact, they have simply been its reversal. Hypocrisy and immodesty or shamelessness go hand in hand; great ostentation does not at all imply greater

sincerity. On the contrary, populism could be defined precisely as the false promise that “speaking plainly” and in general exhibiting oneself also entails being direct and sincere; this, however, is not at all the case (it is simply a form of political hysteria in the technical sense of the term). Those who are shameless or immodest are no closer to truth than those who are hypocrites—the latter delete their traces, the former do not care to delete anything because they deny all evidence. Those one who are immodest or shameless need evidence only to deny it.

Hypocrisy and shamelessness have been two opposite but converging modes of denying modesty. Modesty protects, veils, but does not hide. Rather, precisely and only by veiling does it tell the truth, which escapes both the clamor of loud exhibitions and the lies of all attempts at side tracking investigations and of state secrets.

The Second Republic has been vulgar and shameless. There is an essential violation of the sense of modesty even in reclaiming triviality as a presumed constitutive trait of reality. The injunction to enjoy oneself and the brutal and obtuse aesthetics of self-serving industriousness closed upon itself have more or less conveyed the same message. *Brute* reality is immodest, and the removal of reality is also immodest.

Hypocrisy, exhibitionism, and triviality have problems with modesty because they have problems with reality, for which modesty might on the contrary be the access key. If Italy is not doing well, it might be because these three modes (together with political violence) have prevailed for over forty years, which means to say: for several years now, reality has not expressed itself, has not been emancipated.

The modest mode, of which we are in search, should correspond to a different reality. Modesty is *differently* real; it is—and it is the only one to be such—that wholly otherwise that lets reality be what it is. If kindness and respect do not express the *nature* of things, it will not be a mode alien to things that will save us. To say “modesty” is to bet on the ontological *nature* of reality.

Modesty is not a veil that one would apply on things, a blanket thrown so as to mercifully cover things. It is rather a mode of things and amidst things: *modus in rebus*. This is its difference from political modes (and not from them alone), which betray things in the form of hypocrisy, seduction, and crude “realism” oblivious of reality—ultimately, in the form of violence.

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(Translated by Silvia Benso)