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Centre/Right

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Content

Introduction

I. Italy

Prelude: The Implosion of the Democrazia Cristiana and the End of the First Republic

1. Berlusconism: Market Entry and the First Years in Opposition
2. Casa delle Libertà: The Centrodestra's Return to Power
3. The End of the Berlusconi Era
4. From 2018 Onwards: Between Populists and Technocrats, COVID and Ukraine

II. France

1. The Chirac Era
2. Sarkozy and Sarkozy-ism
3. Between Macron and Le Pen

III. Great Britain

1. The Long Shadow of the Iron Lady: John Major
2. Post-Thatcherism in Opposition: From William Hague to David Cameron
3. The Path to Brexit

Summary

Selected Bibliography
Picture Credits
Acknowledgements
Index of Persons

I. Italy

3. The End of the Berlusconi Era

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With the 2013 elections, a reconfiguration of the Centrodestra had begun, which was now in full swing. On the far right, the Fratelli d'Italia party officially formed, holding its founding congress in early March 2014 under the slogan "In the name of the sovereign people". The FdI stepped up to take the place vacated by the AN on the right fringe of the spectrum, where only extremist splinter groups like Casa Pound had been cavorting ever since. On the other hand, Berlusconi seized the opportunity offered by the change of leadership at the head of the government and the Partito Democratico to approach Renzi, who was in some ways the mirror image of the Cavaliere under left-of-centre auspices. The former mayor of Florence also staged himself as a radical reformer and thus resorted to a narrative that both Berlusconi and Grillo had used. The self-proclaimed "Rottamatore" (scrapper) did not even stop at his own party, for which he envisaged a renewal process in the spirit of Tony Blair's New Labour. And of course, the scrapping agenda also took aim at the encrusted structures of the political system when Renzi announced the major constitutional reform for which people had been waiting for decades. For this, Renzi needed cross-camp support, and Berlusconi, who apparently harboured personal sympathies for this new version of the anti-politician, was open to cooperation, which then resulted in the so-called Patto del Nazareno, paving the way for, among other things, another electoral reform and the curtailment of the Senate's power. Berlusconi could hope to polish up his badly tarnished image as a power player and stay in the game despite his temporary exclusion from public office. But Renzi, who had begun his honeymoon phase as head of government with an outstanding European election result of just over 40 per cent in the spring of 2014, was drunk with all this political power and saw less and less reason to show consideration for Berlusconi and the FI. And so it was no real surprise that Renzi felt strong enough to push through his candidate for president, Sergio Mattarella, against Berlusconi's expressed wishes (Giorgio Napolitano had resigned in January 2015 on grounds of age). When the Cavaliere indignantly denounced the Nazareno Pact, the PD acknowledged this with ostentatious indifference – which corresponded to the shifting power balance whose momentum worked for Renzi and decidedly against Berlusconi: anyone who had expected political retaliation on the part of the FI found themselves deceived. All that was left of the organisation

once eminently able to run a campaign was a shell; it had tied its fate so closely to its founder that his demise was almost inevitably to bring about its own.

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II. France

3. Between Macron and Le Pen

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But had the centre right ever really gone away? This question, which may seem strange, is by no means as far-fetched as it may appear at first. After all, the Republicans may have been in decline since 2012 and lost the 2017 elections. But this did not mean that right-of-centre government policy was not being pursued without them. At least one could get the impression from looking at the cabinets of Édouard Philippe (of which Bayrou was initially a member) and his successor Jean Castex that these were at least governments with a certain lean. Minister of the Interior Gérald Darmanin, Minister of the Economy and Finance Bruno Le Maire as well as Philippe and Castex themselves had been poached from the Republicans. Of course, the LR could hardly console themselves with this; on the contrary, they were the main victims of Macron's policy, which was explicitly aimed at weakening them further and further by appropriating both their personnel and part of their agenda. After all, from Macron's perspective, one did not need to be Machiavelli to work out that the Republicans still posed the greatest threat to his re-election. And not only because battered boxers are known to be the most dangerous, but also because the PS was still far from posing a real challenge and Macron could be almost certain to emerge victorious again from a run-off against Le Pen. Things could only get dangerous for him if he had to face a centre-right candidate in the second round.

And so back again to the regional elections of 2021, from which it was indeed hardly possible to derive reliable forecasts, but which nevertheless had to give the Rassemblement National in particular food for thought. In contrast to the LREM novices, the Rassemblement was no newcomer and had already celebrated respectable successes at the regional level in the 1990s. But the setback, which Le Pen tried to explain away with the low voter turnout ("a democratic scandal"), had deeper causes, which in a way remind us of the constellation in Italy, where Fini's attempt to lead the Alleanza into the (right-wing) centre had been a precarious balancing act from the beginning. It had required disposing of the programmatic poison cabinets

without alienating the party base. This had worked well at times, badly at others, but had definitely reached its limits repeatedly. In 2021, Le Pen found herself at a similar point with her project of *dédiabolisation*. In the "marinated" party, from which Le Pen senior had also been expelled at the instigation of his daughter, resentment arose, as in the AN, against the course of moderation that the leadership had been pushing since 2017. Le Pen's deputy at the time, Florian Philippot, blamed the hard anti-European positions for the fact that the party had only managed to achieve decent success and two mandates. Philippot was forced out of the party after months of quarrelling, but afterwards Le Pen also adopted his position and scaled back her criticism of Europe – as Meloni would later do in Italy. France would leave neither the Eurozone nor the EU under RN leadership – even though the Schengen Agreement would definitely have to be discussed. In view of this rounding off of many formerly sharply nationalist edges, the word "sell-out" began to make the rounds in the staunchly right-wing milieus: The leadership may have been pleased that the majority of French people now regularly found that the RN was "a party like any other" in polls, yet from the point of view of the right-wing base this was not a cause for celebration but a problem: they did not want to be a party like any other; after all, that would mean that they were already part of the system. As a result, what is called in electoral sociology the "enthusiasm gap" emerged among potential RN voters: Many simply could not bring themselves to vote for a party that had obviously succumbed to the siren songs of power.

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III. Great Britain

3. The Path to Brexit

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On the one hand, the coalition agreement between the Tories and the Liberal Democrats was David Cameron's greatest personal triumph, the scope of which cannot be underestimated. Let us recall the cases of Italy and France, where repeated attempts to achieve a stable agreement of the centre-right as a starting point for long-term supremacy had failed time and again. Cameron had managed to do just that with the agreement, while also achieving the feat of drawing a more centre-left party towards the right. As mentioned above, Cameron's and Sarkozy's projects were strikingly different in terms of ideology, but at the same time it is now

also clear that both harboured hegemonic ambitions which they pursued by different means – with their help, Sarkozy had won the presidential election in 2007, and in the early summer of 2010 Cameron was also successful: The realignment of the centre-left that so many progressives had hoped for was transformed by Cameron into a realignment of the centre-right.[1]

But if the coalition agreement, in a sense, embodied the hegemonic moment of the centre-right in the United Kingdom, it also paradoxically marked the foreseeable end of this short summer of centre-right hegemony. Firstly, the agreement was so unfavourable to the Liberal Democrats that it was clear from the moment it was signed that they would cease to be a partner in the medium term, as they could expect to be punished by their electorate; and even in the event of a recovery, they would probably not make the mistake of going into coalition with the Tories again – yet again, parallels with the German Liberals and their soured relationship with the Christian Democratic Union are evident. Secondly, the centre-right coalition opened up a space of opportunity for Ukip, which the party consistently exploited by staging itself as a true right-wing conservative alternative to the effete Tories. Political scientists have in the past repeatedly pointed to Britain's supposed immunity to radical parties, citing its pragmatic culture of negotiation, its long democratic traditions or – more prosaically – the exclusionary mechanisms of the Westminster system. All of this may be true, but at least as important is the fact that for the longest time – until Cameron took office, in fact – the Conservative Party had actually played the entire spectrum to the right of centre, including the far right, at the extreme end of which there was just enough room for pariah splinter parties like the British National Party or the National Front, whose obvious fascist tendencies, however, made them completely unelectable beyond a milieu of limited size. Under Cameron's immediate predecessors, too, cautious attempts at centrist modernisation were repeatedly followed by a return to the core right-wing issues of taxation, immigration and Europe in order to consolidate a dwindling base, also with the help of votes from the far right. In doing so, however, the party followed a de facto course whose fatal effects are familiar to us from the French context. On the one hand, xenophobia and immigration scepticism were fuelled, thus putting water on Ukip's mills; on the other hand, the leadership strictly rejected the occasionally timid demands for alliances, so that Farage's party, like the Front National, could present itself as the victim of a duopoly. In any case, the Conservatives under Cameron presented themselves for the first time in a very long time as a formation clearly positioned in the *centre*-right. The potential this held for Ukip was already evident after the 2010 election: although the party

[1] Andrew Gamble, "New Labour and political change", in: *Parliamentary Affairs* 63/4 (2010), p. 639-652, p. 644.

received just over three per cent of votes, calculations were making the rounds among the Conservatives that Ukip candidates would have cost a number of Tories their victory. After the coalition with the Liberal Democrats, the threat was expected to intensify, and this is where the full implications of what can be described as irony, paradox or tragedy, depending on one's political-analytical persuasion, become apparent: By forming a coalition with the Liberal Democrats, the Conservatives laid the foundation for a potentially long-lasting hegemony of the centre-right, while at the same time strengthening the right-wing fringe. But through their dealings with the Lib Dems, the Tories again deprived themselves of their strategic partner, and in this respect, too, a certain ambivalence can be observed. They could no longer be torn between (socially) liberal and radical conservative competitors, but – and this is the last of many ironic punch lines – the Tories lost precisely the (potential) partner with whom they could have mastered the Ukip challenge without being dragged down into the maelstrom of Brexit.

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Summary

Before we turn to the German context and the question of what the transformations of the centre right in Italy, France and Britain mean for moderate conservatism in this country in this concluding chapter, we must first clarify whether and if so, which lessons can be learnt at all from the three cases discussed – or, to put it less pedagogically: What conclusions can be drawn from the described fates of the centre right?

In my opinion, the most important insight is first of all that an effect observed in different contexts does not have to have the same cause everywhere: After all, the three cases under consideration have a fundamental commonality in that moderate conservatism is in a deep crisis, albeit one that manifests itself differently. In Italy, the only halfway credible candidate for a centre-right party, Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia, has shrunk into an appendage and majority procurer for the Lega and Fratelli d'Italia, which now quite clearly hold the hegemonic position over the spectrum to the right of centre. If the Berlusconi-led coalitions could still be described with a certain degree of benevolence as *centre*-right governments in view of the proportions, this no longer seems appropriate when looking at the senior partners of the current alliance: It is a government led by authoritarian-nationalist forces. In France, the centre-right is similarly deserted, and here the situation is perhaps even more dramatic, considering that Les Républicains have now been in opposition for many years after heavy

electoral defeats and are not at peace internally either – Éric Ciotti is the third party leader in five years. The Tories have even had four leaders in the same period, and in the UK we are dealing with the paradoxical case of a Conservative Party that has been in government alone since 2015, currently has the largest majority since the Thatcher era and yet – or perhaps because of this – seems to be running on fumes. The battles over Brexit and the directional decisions regarding positioning vis-à-vis Ukip and the Brexit Party have left deep scars. If the Tory Party had a face, it would be wrinkle-ridden and littered with scars. At this point, hardly anyone expects Rishi Sunak to remain prime minister after the next elections, and the self-destructive potential that has built up in the party is likely to come to full fruition only in the opposition that threatens then, although even the current self-destructiveness is impressive, considering, for example, the fiasco of Liz Truss's short tenure.

We are dealing with the same general findings in all three cases, but the longitudinal analyses also show that there is not one uniform dynamic or the same set of factors that can be held responsible for this development. There certainly are similarities and parallels here, which I will address later, but it seems important to me to emphasise that the respective dynamics are strongly shaped by specific contextual factors: This is quite obviously the case in the UK, where a specific line of conflict regarding EU membership that emerged over decades drew the Tories into a spiral of radicalisation that did not end with Brexit. The weight of contextual and highly contingent factors should also be highlighted in the case of France, where one can point to the extraordinary role of Marine Le Pen's person, for example. Yes, the "old" Front National also had a voter potential that should not be underestimated, as the "shock" of 2002 proved, but nevertheless the party would probably have remained walled off politically under Jean-Marie Le Pen's leadership; the 94-year-old would have been too old and too radical ten years ago to be a real threat to the "mainstream". It is rare enough for parties like the FN to pass the baton without it splitting, but what Marine Le Pen achieved went far beyond that: she dusted off the old strategy of Le Pen's opponent Mégret and gave her formation a pseudo-bourgeois facelift, but with such attempts at "demonization" party captains usually suffer shipwreck. Ultimately, this was also the fate of Gianfranco Fini in Italy after initial successes. Le Pen junior, however, managed to bring the party into line and make it respectable as a "normal party". This line held (to a large extent) even when Marine had little tangible to show apart from decent results, such as in 2017 – after all, it was not until the 2022 elections that the parliamentary breakthrough was achieved. Without the extraordinary political talent and strategic skill with which the daughter of the party patriarch, of all people, was blessed, the success story of today's Rassemblement National, and thus also the decline of the Républicains, cannot be explained.

In Italy, on the other hand, the overarching contextual factor is the caesura of the transition from the First to the Second Republic. As a result, the Forza Italia, which had sprung from the ground and was designed for unconditional success, abandoned the rather broad consensus on the exclusion of the right and the national level just like that and provided the pariahs of the Lega Nord and Alleanza Nazionale in the 1994 elections with considerable legitimacy by integrating them into a government coalition. Therefore, what is specific to the case of Italy is that, on the one hand, the caesura of 1992–94 considerably interrupted or cut the path dependencies and traditions that structure established party systems, and that, on the other, Berlusconi's decision established a new path dependency that continues to have an effect today: In contrast to France, Great Britain and many other countries, where the strategies of the political game to the right of the centre always include demarcation to the right, where firewalls are erected and the centre is invoked, in the Italy of the Second Republic there was not even a fence separating the presumed representative of the centre right, Forza Italia, from its right-wing authoritarian competitors, who were, after all, also its alliance partners to a great degree. Incidentally, this points to another extremely important contextual factor, namely electoral law, which has different but certainly powerful effects in all three cases. Italy is in a sense an anomaly because of the specificity of this caesura, and accordingly the parallels between Britain and France are more pronounced than, say, those between Italy and Britain (namely because the effects of majoritarianism are more similar in France and Britain). But this does not mean that Italy is not an interesting case, because firstly, the space of the centre-right and the positional struggles that have characterised it since 1989/90 can be studied here under laboratory conditions, so to speak, and furthermore, it is by no means the case that no connections can be drawn to the other cases, only these are on other levels, as we will see. Above all, however, Italy is a central point of reference in that many developments take place much earlier here than in other contexts and in this sense the country has a model character – all of Italy, or possibly just Silvio Berlusconi and the FI: after all, the Cavaliere invented the figure of the successful and media-savvy businessman who promises to revamp the state in the hands-on spirit of entrepreneurial reason – Donald Trump is nothing more than one of his epigones in this respect.

At this point, however, the political dimension of this first finding on the importance of contextual and contingent factors comes into play, for Italy may be a pioneer in many respects, and some would even speak of a portent. However, in view of the contextuality and contingency of the developments described, there is no reason to assume that things to the right of centre must necessarily go the Italian way elsewhere – or the French or British way. To say that certain

developments in the direction of a decline of moderate conservatism are taking place with a certain necessity would at best be a convincing assessment if structural constellations existed across contexts from which corresponding mechanisms could be derived. It was precisely in order to test this theory that our working hypothesis was introduced, which first postulates that in the moderate conservatism of the centre-right, conservative and liberal elements had entered into a more or less coherent bond, which begins to become fragile the moment it is tugged on by genuinely liberal forces from one side and genuinely authoritarian forces from the other. The crisis of conservatism would then be due to the fact that moderate conservative parties are now facing not only liberal but also authoritarian competition across the board and are thus being squeezed from two sides, which, incidentally, raises the follow-up question of what this growth of rivals on the right is due to.[2] The Netherlands and Spain show that one can at least have some initial suspicion of such a pattern. With regard to the cases discussed here, however, it must be noted that there is considerable variance in terms of the explanatory power of the thesis, with Italy fitting the pattern the least. This finding is again partly due to the caesura in the transition to the Second Republic, but also has more specific reasons, such as the lack of a genuine liberal party and, beyond that, the segmentation of the Italian electorate: not only the voters of the Lega and the Fratelli d'Italia, but also those of the FI identified themselves in large parts as "right-wing" and accordingly showed themselves to be fundamentally less receptive to advances from the liberal centre or even a left-liberal-social democratic party such as the Partito Democratico. Whether this assessment is still valid could be observed from who will prevail – potentially – in the struggle for Berlusconi's legacy, i.e. whether his electorate tends to migrate in the direction of the FdI or can be won over by Matteo Renzi's Italia Viva, which probably still comes closest to a liberal-centrist party in the Italian context. This is a scenario in which an already deeply weakened FI would actually be dealt a death blow by being divided between the right-wing poles of the Lega and FdI and a possibly strengthening centre, but that remains speculative at this point. Therefore, one must sum up as follows: The plight of the centre-right in Italy can – and must – be attributed to various factors, including the continuum between centre-right and right-wing fringe as well as the serious weaknesses that FI and Berlusconi

[2] One answer to this follow-up question is that this development is due to a "silent counter-revolution", which can be understood as a kind of backlash in reaction to the original silent revolution of a change in values towards post-materialism that took place from the beginning of the 1970s. This seems quite plausible to me, as long as one does not understand this drift to the right within the electorates as an independent variable. As the previous chapters have shown, there are certainly interaction effects between political supply and demand, i.e. the electorate is also shaped in its ideological profile by the agendas of the parties; cf. on the "silent counter-revolution" Bale/Rovira Kaltwasser (eds.), *Riding the Populist*.

revealed as government actors; against this, in my view, the explanatory power of the working hypothesis pales, at least for the period under study.

Great Britain also for a long time does not correspond to the pattern that can be derived from the hypothesis, although the Westminster democracy certainly belongs to the "hard cases", because a tendential two-party system, as the British one was for decades, hardly allows for the coexistence of three political forces in such a constellation. Against this background, it is first of all remarkable that the hypothesis takes hold, even if only temporarily and significantly during a period in which the beginnings of a development towards a multi-party system can be observed: As the Liberal Democrats find themselves at the zenith of their strength in 2010, Britain is at least a two-and-a-half party system, and with their rise, liberal competition is indeed emerging for the Tories, with the particular concern of Cameron's Conservatives at the time being that the Lib Dems might form a coalition with New Labour. As is well known, competition from the right-wing fringe was also forming at that same time, with Ukip benefiting precisely from the Tories' supposed mediation in the course of their coalition with the Lib Dems. Thus, the scenario of our working hypothesis actually emerges here, at least for a short phase: On the one hand, the Tories had to reach out to the Lib Dems, especially around the 2010 election, in order to prevent the worst-case scenario of a centre-left alignment; on the other hand, from the beginning of the legislature onwards, the pressure of the future Brexiteers and the authoritarian right as a whole was felt more and more acutely, which made for tough internal party disputes on how to respond to this dilemma. But the moment this constellation and the threat it posed had crystallised, it faded away: had the referendum on electoral reform promoted by the Lib Dems succeeded, it would have been quite conceivable that the Lib Dems and Ukip could have put the screws on the Tories; but the referendum failed, and participation in government turned into a nightmare for the Liberal Democrats, who fell back into relative irrelevance in 2015. This meant that at least the liberal side of the potential grip of the screws was a thing of the past, due not only to the demise of the Lib Dems but also to the fact that New Labour, which had never been anything like a liberal party on domestic security, moved far to the left in terms of economic policy with the election of Jeremy Corbyn. Given the disappearance of the liberal-centrist threat, it is in a sense consistent from a strategic perspective that the Tories subsequently set about a kind of hostile takeover of the Ukip agenda in order to neutralise this opponent as well. As described above, the price of this suppression was that the party transformed itself into a decidedly Eurosceptic party in large parts, branded immigration as a threat and also followed in the footsteps of the far right in cultural warfare. The US-American political scientist Paul Pierson, who belongs to the research tradition of historical

institutionalism, from which, among other things, the concept of path dependency, which has already been mentioned several times, originates, has pointed out in his research that even causes that are only temporary can develop continuous effects and/or effects that only occur much later.[3] Against this background, it could be argued that the fleeting constellation of the liberal-authoritarian complementary threat set mechanisms in motion that ultimately led to the radicalisation of the Tories under May and especially Johnson, whereby the prerequisite for this was the party's preconception of Euroscepticism, which has been traced back here to the Thatcher/Major era – another ideational path dependency. And although this pincer constellation never manifested itself in the same way again, it should be noted that it continued to occupy the collective imagination of the Tories as a potential threat scenario: On the one hand, there was the concern that a new right-wing rival could emerge in reaction to the COVID policy (whereby Farage's plan to take the former place of Ukip and the Brexit party with ReformUK failed grandiosely), or that the Lib Dems could recover permanently if they achieved successes in by-elections, which have, however, remained rare to date.

Things are less complicated in the case of France, because here the hypothesis does not actually apply over a long period of time. Until the late 1990s, the RPR, as the main party-political representative of moderate conservatism, repeatedly entered into electoral alliances with the UDF, which primarily represented the camp of liberal centrism – albeit with an increasingly diffuse profile. With the founding of the UMP, the two camps – minus Bayrou and his UDF/Modem – even merged, although their significance in terms of power politics remained very manageable. All this changes, however, when Macron initiates LREM. He awakens a "bourgeois bloc" virtually overnight and powerfully occupies the centre of the spectrum. This liberal competition of the Républicains is opposed on the right by a Front National with pseudo-bourgeois aspirations, and the result corresponds pretty much to the expectations of the hypothesis: since 2017, the LR have been torn between Macron's Ensemble and Le Pen's Rassemblement, which is most conspicuously documented in Macron's repeated poaching of top LR personnel. A large part of the liberal-centrist wing of the Républicains has now defected to Macron's alliance, and consequently the rest of the LR are leaning more and more to the right. It is significant that the new leader Ciotti sees the main difference between the RN and his party in the latter's ability to govern – the respective agendas are obviously visibly congruent.

[3] Cf. Paul Pierson, *Politics in Time. History, Institutions and Social Analysis*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 2004.

What can be deduced from these findings? Well, on the one hand, that the hypothesis shouldn't be rejected because it has no explanatory power in any of the cases; nor, on the other hand, that we have found an explanation that is equally effective across various contexts and would therefore neutralise or trump other factors, such as the electoral system – although it would still be necessary to find out why this constellation of political forces is so widespread. Although this hypothesis can contribute to explaining the crisis of conservatism, it needs to be supplemented by alternative approaches. At this point, however, I do not want to follow down this patch any further, and instead turn to the congruencies and correspondences that can be noted below the level of abstraction of the working hypothesis. We are not looking for another causal hypothesis to explain the conservative malaise, but about parallel developments and conspicuous features that characterise the process of the decline of moderate conservatism in the three cases. I shall delineate these commonalities in five points: parties, persons, enemy stereotypes, Europe, and the increasing prominence of cultural struggles.

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