The 1990s was to be a golden decade for Italian socialism, and for the Socialist Party (PSI). The fall of the Berlin Wall and the transformation of the Communist Party into the PDS were seen as key developments that only helped the PSI which, under Bettino Craxi, was on a steady rise and aiming to become the dominant party of the left in Italy. It was hoped that 1992 would mark not only the centennial celebrations for the PSI but another electoral breakthrough for the Socialists. By the middle of the decade, the oldest party on the Italian left had disappeared, the Socialists were splintered into three different directions and it was the PDS that led a moderate centre-left coalition of progressive forces to government for the first time in the history of the Republic. There are a number of questions rooted in the turn of events of this decade: why was the left unable to come to power for so long? why was Italy unable to develop a social democratic party that forged a consensus in the postwar era as in other European democracies? why was the Communist Party able to dominate the left? and how can we understand the complete collapse of such an historic party?

The book edited by Spencer Di Scala, a collection of the interventions at a March 1993 conference held in the United States to mark one hundred years of socialism in Italy, tries to place these questions within an historical context. It brings together leading scholars from Italy and the United States to look at a range of topics from Giolitti’s strategy to an insider’s view of the Kennedy administration’s policy towards the opening to the left. The collection of experts is impressive, and they are particularly good at laying out some of the historical divisions within the left and particularly within the Socialist Party.

However, if readers are looking for new historical evidence or interpretations, they will be disappointed by the book. The chapters essentially state positions that are well known, and the interventions are generally too brief to provide insightful analysis. The book reaffirms many of the conventional arguments that try to identify the sources of the “anomalies” of the Italian left and particularly of the PSI; usually this comes down to a strategic error by Nenni not to distance the PSI from the Communists in the immediate postwar period. This is countered by the strategic capacities of a leader like Craxi who charted a course along lines more similar to other social democratic parties in the 1980s. These debates are well known to those familiar with the literature on the Italian left; for those that are not, they will find the syntheses provided in the book useful. The strength of the book are the historical chapters in section one. Landolfi, Di Scala and De Grand provide a broad panorama in their interventions that allow the reader to understand the evolution of the Socialist movement at the turn of the century. De Grand’s focus on Giolitti illustrates that the nature of Italian socialism was affected by the fact that Italy had not developed a traditional middle-class liberal party. The fact that there was a part of the socialist movement that was prepared to be cut off from the base of mass support was something that characterised the postwar period as well.

However, beyond a discussion of party strategies and divisions, the contributions in this volume do not shed any new light on the fortunes of Italian socialism; and,
ultimately, why the PSI collapsed the way that it did. There is little discussion of the PSI in power in the 1980s, other than what seem to be, from the vantage point of the mid-1990s, rather naive statements about the Socialists bringing “decisionismo” to governing Italy. Clearly, the PSI was just as guilty as the Communists of not developing a progressive force in Italy until the 1990s. We still need to understand why, within an examination that goes beyond the usual exploration of reformist versus maximalist options faced by the Socialist leadership at various points in its history.

The chapter by Margherita Repetto Alaia is one of the contributions to this volume that might provide some new perspectives. Her discussion of women and mass politics looks at the links between social forces and parties; or, more precisely, the fact that these were not fully developed in the case of women. It makes one wonder, for instance, why there is no chapter dealing with labour and trade unions. One of the distinguishing features of the PSI is that it did not develop the links with a strong trade union that one finds with social democratic parties in Germany or Britain. Given the emerging literature on social movements and civil society, the volume is relatively silent on the links between an historic social movement, new forces in society and the oldest party of the left.

In an indirect way, the contributions in this book do provide some understanding why the PSI collapsed. The almost exclusive focus on party leadership reflects the oligarchic nature of Italian politics. Pellicani claims in his chapter that Craxi and the Socialists were attacked because they tried to break the “consociative” model of Italian politics in the 1980s. Yet, nothing exemplified better the closed nature of Italian politics than backroom bargains between Craxi and the DC leaders, Forlani and Andreotti, in the 1980s. The CAF, as it came to be known, represented for many the cynical use of power for its own sake. Moreover, it symbolised a political class that had lost contact with an increasingly fragmented civil society, and refused to listen to the demands for change.

The book also is interesting in that it gives us some indication of how unaware most scholars were of how much a historical social movement had been reduced to a political machine designed to occupy power. With benefit of just a few years of hindsight, we are curious to find out why 1992 marked the beginning of the end for the PSI and not the dawn of a new era.

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Una costante del curriculum in molte università nordamericane è il cosiddetto corso di culture and civilization. Il presente volume è il risultato di ricerche e riflessioni per un corso sull’“Italia moderna” insegnato dall’autore. Il libro, scrive il Mignone, “is an introduction to contemporary Italy, the mother of western civilization and paradoxically, one of the most stable and chaotic democracies in Europe. It has been written assuming no knowledge of Italy or Italian politics and history” (xiii). Chiara è anche la