

## Piero Gobetti: Not Only an Analysis of Italian Affairs

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### Abstract

Piero Gobetti (Turin 1901- Paris 1926) has been always considered just as a political writer of Italian affairs, but this amounts to an understatement. In his journals, Gobetti took into account several foreign countries with regard to politics, economy, culture, customs and traditions. In these analysis Gobetti proved to have extensive knowledge of the inland dynamics of each state described.

**Keywords:** Gobetti, foreign affairs, Socialism, cultural heritage

### Introduction

Even though Piero Gobetti wrote mainly about Fascism and Italian affairs in the 1920s, simultaneously his three journals (*Energie Nove*, *Rivoluzione Liberale* and *Il Baretti*) showed great interest in international politics. France, Belgium, Russia, Germany and the United States were at the heart of essential reflections.

### Gobetti and France: cultural heritage and Socialism

Gobetti was an ardent Francophile: this is due mainly to the strong bond between Piedmont and France. In the years in which Gobetti wrote, French culture was a reference point for the turinese *intelligentsia*. According to Norberto Bobbio:

From the Enlightenment since now, all the movements of ideas born in France have affected Italy [...]¹.

In addition to it- as Pietro Polito noted²- the French thinker Georges Sorel played a strong role in the birth of the Italian labor movement³: Gobetti dedicated to him a special issue of *Rivoluzione Liberale*.

In other words, French heritage was something important to Italy; the same could not be said for English or German culture⁴.

In *Rivoluzione Liberale* (1922-1925) some French events such as the military occupation of Düsseldorf in 1921 and the invasion of the Ruhr Valley in 1923 were carefully analysed: Gobetti stressed that France would have been able to determine risky political developments and a negative impact on Europe. In Gobetti's opinion, France was still a powerful country: the Treaty of Versailles and the decisions it gave rise to testified how authoritative this State was in the 1920s. Raymond Poincaré, responsible for what happened in the Ruhr Valley, was described as follows:

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¹ N. Bobbio, *Alcune osservazioni sui rapporti culturali Italia-Francia*, in N. Bobbio, S. Nitti et al., *Piero Gobetti e la Francia. Atti del colloquio italo-francese*, Franco Angeli, Milano, 1985, p. 45.

Original text: "Non c'è stato movimento di idee in Francia, dall'Illuminismo in poi, che non abbia avuto la sua immediata ripercussione in Italia [...]".

See also G. Bergami, *Torino e la cultura francese negli anni '20*, in N. Bobbio, S. Nitti et al., *Piero Gobetti e la Francia* cit., p. 71.

² See P. Polito, *Gobetti e Sorel*, in "Mezzosecolo", n. 6, 1985-1986, pp. 29-62.

³ Sorel (1847-1922) attempted to fill in what he believed were gaps in Marxist theory, resulting in an extremely heterodox and idiosyncratic view of Marxism. Beginning in the second half of the 1880s, he published articles in various fields (hydrology, architecture, physics, political history, and philosophy). In 1893, he publicly affirmed his position as a Marxist and a socialist. His social and political philosophy owed much to his reading of Proudhon, Karl Marx, Giambattista Vico, Henri Bergson and later William James. Sorel's engagement in the political world was accompanied by a correspondence with Benedetto Croce and later with Vilfredo Pareto. Sorel worked on the first French Marxist journals, *L'Ère nouvelle* and *Le Devenir social*, and then participated at the turn of the century in the revisionist debate and crisis within Marxism. He took the side of Eduard Bernstein against Karl Kautsky.

⁴ England and Germany influenced Italy particularly in the field of philosophy.

His [of Poincaré] “lawyerly” patriotism makes him a man of a rethoric petty bourgeoisie<sup>1</sup>.

According to Gobetti, Poincaré was the leading representative of the so called “democratic imperialism”<sup>2</sup>.

But beyond everything, the most interesting articles written by Gobetti concerned a socialist politician, Paul Painlevé, running for president in 1924. Painlevé was, first of all, a mathematician given to politics: his Enlightenment background and scientific approach made him a true representative of France.

As Gobetti reported,

Enlightenment and parliamentary tradition coexist in him [...]: the distrust of Fascism is something intrinsic for him<sup>3</sup>.

Concluding his reflections, Gobetti affirmed that Painlevé represented that political class able to mitigate the *revanche* policy and solve the reparations issue.

### **Gobetti and Belgium: “echo chamber” for European events**

Even though, at first glance, Belgium seems a *pièce ajoutée* of France, Gobetti devoted a separate study to it. Religious conflicts, position of the various political groups and economy were closely reviewed.

This was the “portrait” of the country:

Its [of Belgium] strength lies in the balance among agriculture, industry and trade. Relations with foreign countries are extremely delicate: no form of audacity is allowed to Belgium with complete impunity, all the world crises have a detrimental effect on its trade [...]. In the European context the people of Belgium are provincial and continuously dragged to play a role beyond their power<sup>4</sup>.

In “*Rivoluzione Liberale*” Belgium was described as a country bound to face continuous challenges and so endowed with an extraordinary capacity for renewal.

As Gobetti added, its modernity also consisted in a well-organized railway system, in a optimistic and business State Socialism (involving most of the Catholics) and in a wide-ranging welfare state<sup>5</sup>.

Nevertheless, the upcoming elections seem to be what matters most to Gobetti, because they entailed a real risk of social twisting: past issues (such as the twenty-year crisis of Belgian Socialism, the disunity of the Catholic Party, the nationalist revival and the trend towards regionalism) could have occurred again and cause an explosion of the whole situation.

### **Gobetti and Russia: among history, ecstatic contemplation and Liberalism**

In *Energie Nove* (1918-1920) and *Rivoluzione Liberale* (1922-1925), Piero Gobetti wrote several essays on Russia and in particular on the 1917 Revolution; Language, Literature and Leninism were the three *Ls* sparking Gobetti's interest. Together with his wife, Ada, he began studying Russian with the aim of translating Andreiev's works<sup>6</sup>; but ultimately, it is the phenomenon of the Bolshevik revolution that motivated Gobetti's general passion for Russia.

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<sup>1</sup> P. Gobetti, *Le elezioni in Francia*, in “*Rivoluzione Liberale*” (from now on RL), III, n. 19, May 6, 1924, p. 73; the article is also included in P. Spriano (edited by), *Scritti politici* (from now on SP), pp. 664-673, p. 667.

<sup>2</sup> Ivi, p. 669.

<sup>3</sup> P. Gobetti, *Un candidato all'Eliseo*, in SP, pp. 680-683, p. 681.

Original text: “L'illuminismo scientifico si è sommato con il tradizionalismo parlamentare francese [...]; la diffidenza verso il fascismo è quasi una riserva innata”.

<sup>4</sup> P. Gobetti, *Fiamminghi e Valloni*, in RL, IV, n. 30, November 30, 1925, pp. 121-122; the article is also included in SP, pp. 866-876, p. 872.

<sup>5</sup> Ivi, p. 867.

See also F. Somenzari, *Gobetti e la politica internazionale nelle riviste “Energie Nove” e la “Rivoluzione Liberale”*. *Introduzione*, in F. Somenzari (edited by), *Piero Gobetti. Vita Internazionale*, Aras, Fano, 2017, p. 62.

<sup>6</sup> Gobetti defined Leonid Andreiev “the greatest of contemporary Russian writers”. See P. Gobetti, *Leonida Andreiev*, in “*Energie Nove*” (from now on EN), II, n. 8, September 30, 1919.

Andreiev was defender of the revolution of 1905 and contrary to that of 1917, but above all he was against the excesses of Bolshevism.

In “Frammenti di estetismo politico” and “La Russia dei Soviet”, Gobetti presented the Revolution as one of those mythical and unrepeatable events that history offers only rarely: for this reason it had to be contemplated rather than judged. As he reported:

The Russian Revolution is history, you must study it; it is a social phenomenon [...]. You have before you a world of constant progress, and you looked for the scheme in which to enclose it [...]. The Revolutions do not look at the past. They create and shape new realities. The government of Lenin and Trotzki is a *de facto* government. It is the will of Russia. A state organization and not a scientific investigation. Life and not the book<sup>1</sup>.

Gobetti stressed the importance of such a simple and fundamental concept: the Revolution is a fact and a new democracy is born. At first, he seemed to categorically reject any form of manipulation of the phenomenon, preferring a historical and objective interpretation to one of political expediency.

In Gobetti's writings, Lenin and Trotzki were called great statesmen who elevated Russia to the level of Western civilizations, facing dangerous government responsibilities<sup>2</sup>. And then:

They [Lenin e Trotzki ] are not only Bolsheviks; they are the men of action who have awakened a people and are recreating a soul for them<sup>3</sup>.

The position taken by Gobetti led the communist Antonio Gramsci to write that Gobetti was a young man who had understood the greatness of the Revolution and its leaders<sup>4</sup>.

However, after this first contemplation of the phenomenon of the Russian Revolution, in 1921 Gobetti denied himself, by stating:

Trotzki affirms a liberal<sup>5</sup> view of history [...]. Only for tactical necessities and for historical needs, the Revolution- full of Liberalism, in a country like Russia, home of the *mir*, worshiper of every form of community- must take the name and sometimes the appearance of socialist work [...]. It is up to the historian to affirm the truth above political contingencies<sup>6</sup>.

From the ascertainment of the extraordinary nature of the Revolution and from a gaze that wanted to be as objective as possible, Gobetti moved on to an extremely partial political interpretation, placing the Russian events into the riverbed of the liberalism current. According to Gobetti, Trotzki carried on (without knowing it) a liberal, non-socialist design.

In this case, Gobetti's interpretation is neither shareable nor sustainable, but it is very interesting because it clearly demonstrates the non-systematic nature of his thinking<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> P. Gobetti, *Frammenti di estetismo politico*, in EN, II, n. 10, November 30, 1919; the article is also included in P. Spriano (edited by), *Scritti Politici* cit., pp. 206-213. Original text: “La Rivoluzione Russa è storia, voi dovete studiarla; è un fenomeno sociale [...]. Avete dinanzi un mondo in formazione, e voi cercate lo schema in cui rinchiuderlo [...]. Le Rivoluzioni (e tutta la storia del resto) non guardano il passato. Creano e plasmano nuove realtà. Il governo di Lenin e Trotzki è un governo di fatto. E' la volontà della Russia. Un'organizzazione statale e non un'indagine scientifica. La vita e non il libro”.

<sup>2</sup> See P. Gobetti, *La Russia dei Soviet*, in “Volontà”, February 15, 1921; the article is also included in P. Spriano (edited by), *Scritti politici* cit., pp. 197- 206, p. 197.

<sup>3</sup> P. Gobetti, *Rassegna di questioni politiche*, in EN, II, n. 6, July 25, 1919, pp. 132-139; the article is also included in P. Spriano (edited by), *Scritti politici* cit., p. 151. Original text: “Non sono solo dei bolscevichi, sono gli uomini d'azione che hanno destato un popolo e gli vanno ricreando un'anima”.

<sup>4</sup> P. Gobetti, *Paradosso sullo spirito russo*, Einaudi, Torino, 1969, p. XXI.

<sup>5</sup> In this case, the adjective “Liberal” has to be understood in its historical sense, that is “relative to the Liberal Party”. Today the term “Liberal” is used with the meaning of “progressive”.

<sup>6</sup> P. Gobetti, *Trotzki*, in “Il resto del Carlino», April 5, 1921; the article is also included in P. Spriano (edited by), *Scritti Politici* cit., pp. 206-210. Original text: “Trotzki afferma una visione liberale della storia [...] Soltanto per necessità tattiche e per esigenze storiche quest'opera [la rivoluzione] feconda di liberalismo, in un paese come la Russia, patria del mir, adoratrice di ogni forma di comunità, deve prendere il nome e talvolta anche le apparenze di opera socialista [...]. Spetta allo storico affermare la verità al di sopra delle contingenze politiche”.

<sup>7</sup> See P. Polito, *L'eresia di Piero Gobetti*, Raineri Vivaldelli, Torino, 2018.

## Gobetti and Germany: from Versailles to Weimar

In the twenties of the twentieth century German affairs were so important that "Rivoluzione Liberale" dedicated one of its issues entirely to Germany<sup>1</sup>. Gobetti and his fellow writers were very interested in the political and economic context mainly because of Versailles Treaty. Gobetti's considerations were strongly influenced by the thought of Gaetano Salvemini and by the works of Francesco Saverio Nitti.

In refer to Versailles Conference, Gobetti was pretty clear from the beginning:

Versailles not only is not a peace, but it excludes peace<sup>2</sup>.

As I have already said, in his judgment the turinese thinker was affected by several readings; however, precisely in those years, the Piero Gobetti Publishing House decided to print "La Paix", written by Nitti, who had been the Italian Prime Minister in 1919 and had opposed to punitive measures towards Germany. With regard to the Versailles Peace, Nitti affirmed:

The damage caused by the war has been massive and it will undermine Europe for the next fifty years: the damage caused by the peace (conceived as a peace of war) has been still worse [...]. The peace treaties- as Clemenceau affirmed- were a way to continue the war.

I can say that there has been a failure of peace together with a failure of war<sup>3</sup>.

The above-mentioned quotations show an intense exchange of views between Gobetti and Nitti.

In this issue entirely devoted to Germany, the second most important topic was the economic scene arising from the Versailles Conference.

Reparations were so exorbitant that Versailles Treaty underwent six modifications before its entry into force in 1921. Between 1921 and 1924 the Treaty encountered six further changes because of Germany's insolvency.

According to "Rivoluzione Liberale",

During these four-year negotiations Germany payed very little, but this situation in and of itself had destabilised its financial system and internal order [...]<sup>4</sup>.

Despite the failure of the Treaty, the Entente powers continued to expect German payments in gold<sup>5</sup>.

The Weimar Republic together with Socialism was the third topic considered by the review. Specifically, "Rivoluzione Liberale" examined the relationships between the *Reich* and the *Länder*, that is a significant part of the new Constitution<sup>6</sup>.

## Gobetti and the United States of America

In Gobetti's writings even the United States were taken into consideration and not by chance: the First World War brought about the entry of the United States themselves into European life and dynamics, especially at the end of the conflict.

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<sup>1</sup> See "Rivoluzione Liberale", III, n. 1-2, 1924.

<sup>2</sup> P. Gobetti, *Il trionfo della democrazia*, in "Rivoluzione Liberale", II, n. 4, February 1st, 1923; the article is also included in P. Spriano (edited by), *Scritti Politici*, Einaudi, Torino, 1997, pp. 448-452.

Original text: "Versailles non solo non è una pace, ma esclude la pace".

<sup>3</sup> F. S. Nitti, *La Paix*, Piero Gobetti Editore, Torino, 1925, pp. 59-61.

Original text: "I danni della guerra sono stati grandissimi e per cinquant'anni almeno l'Europa li risentirà: i danni della pace, concepita come una *peace of war*, sono stati più grandi [...]. I trattati, come disse Clemenceau, erano nel suo concetto un modo di continuare la guerra [...]. Posso dire soltanto che, se vi è un fallimento della guerra, vi è stato anche un fallimento della pace".

<sup>4</sup> A. Cabiati, *Il fallimento delle riparazioni*, in "Rivoluzione Liberale", III, n. 1-2, 1924, pp. 6-7.

Original text: "Durante queste trattative quadriennali, la Germania non aveva pagato gran cosa; ma in compenso aveva sconquassato la sua finanza e l'ordine interno [...]".

<sup>5</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>6</sup> G. Ansaldo, *La Prussia e il federalismo*, in "Rivoluzione Liberale", III, n. 1-2, 1924, pp. 1-3.

In refer to the Weimar Constitution, see U. Villani-Lubelli, *Dall'Impero alla nascita della democrazia: il fragile equilibrio politico nella Repubblica di Weimar*, in "Le Carte e la Storia", I, 2017, pp. 122-135.

Although in the 1920s President Harding carried on the motto *America first* - the basis of a highly isolationist policy - the Wilsonian conception of Europe and international relations was destined to have a lasting echo in the Old Continent, even by virtue of territorial changes which it produced at the Versailles Conference. The Fourteen Points and the birth of the League of Nations deeply engraved on the new European balance<sup>1</sup>.

In the above-mentioned journal "Energie Nove", Gobetti focused on Wilsonism and the League of Nations; the writer's judgment on this international organization (wanted by the Democratic President) was in some ways cautious and even a little suspicious: according to Gobetti, the League of Nations was characterized by excessive abstractness and a utopian vision that damaged its own work. So wrote Gobetti:

To correctly understand and evaluate everything that passes under the name of the League of Nations, we cannot stop at an examination of the potential abstract value of the idea, but we must immediately see its value in relation to social life, that is we must study in which practical forms it [the League] can be implemented<sup>2</sup>.

It was not only the idea itself relevant, but its practical implementation, its sustainability: "the politician feeds on reality".

The appeal to democracy as a pivot of peaceful coexistence and a guiding principle of international relations alone was not enough, beyond the morality that this internationalist project carried with it. On this point, Gobetti was very close to Salvemini's position.

Beyond the criticisms, in the pages of Gobetti there is however the recognition of the value of the *New Diplomacy*, that is of a vision that, in spite of its specific and contingent limits, will reveal itself in the long-term forward-looking.

A few years later, on the occasion of Wilson's death, Gobetti wrote:

To realize his greatness, the judgment must instead concern his American figure, in the history of America. His own election to the presidential seat is a solemn fact: as early as 1914 he had turned out to be a great statesman. After the mediocrity of presidents like Taft or Roosevelt, the temper of a Lincoln emerges in Wilson<sup>3</sup>.

## Conclusions

As I have already written, Gobetti's thought also concerned the international political context and not just Italian affairs. The end of the First World War and the Versailles Conference obliged him to consider several countries in terms of economic and social conditions, political situations and general effects after the events above-mentioned.

What emerges from Gobetti's analysis is a composite picture of Europe and of the United States in the 1920s.

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<sup>1</sup> It's essential to remember that, based on the principle of self-determination of peoples, the Austro-Hungarian Empire had disintegrated, giving rise to numerous national states; moreover, with respect to Italy, Wilson had taken a very tough position, denying it some strategic territories. See M. Cattaruzza, *L'Italia e la questione adriatica (1918-1926). Dibattiti parlamentari e panorama internazionale*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> P. Gobetti, *La Società delle Nazioni*, in EN, I, n. 5, January 1-15, 1919; the article is also included in P. Spriano (edited by), *Scritti Politici cit.*, pp. 65-67.

Original text: "Per intendere e valutare rettamente tutto ciò che passa sotto il nome di Società delle Nazioni, non ci possiamo fermare ad un esame del valore potenziale in astratto dell'idea, ma dobbiamo scendere subito a vederne il valore in relazione alla vita sociale, dobbiamo studiare cioè in quali forme pratiche essa si può attuare".

<sup>3</sup> P. Gobetti, *Uomini e idee. Lo stile di Wilson*, in RL, III, n. 7, February 12, 1924; the article is also included in P. Spriano (edited by), *Scritti politici cit.*, pp. 591-593. Original text: "Per rendersi conto della sua grandezza il giudizio deve invece riguardare la sua figura di americano, nella storia dell'America. Già la sua elezione al seggio presidenziale è un fatto solenne: già nel 1914 si era rivelato un grande statista. Dopo la mediocrità di presidenti come Taft o Roosevelt, in Wilson si sente la tempra di un Lincoln".

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