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## ***Complexio Oppositorum:*** **Notes on the Left in Neoliberal Italy**

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**W**hat keeps the social order from dissolving into chaos,” wrote Pierre Bourdieu about neoliberalism, “is the continuity or survival of those very institutions and representatives of the old order that [are] in the process of being dismantled, and all the work of all the categories of social workers, as well as all the forms of social solidarity, familial or otherwise.” Embedded in his account are two assumptions. One is that neoliberalism is incapable of producing a stable social and moral order of its own and that it creates only chaos. The only order it can generate is “the utopia of endless exploitation.”<sup>1</sup> The other is that old and new orders are not only incommensurable ontologically but set apart temporally. Locked in battle, the representatives of previous forms of social solidarity exert their influence on the present by bravely stitching together the fragments wrought by neoliberalism’s alienating, atomizing powers.

This article takes issue with both these assumptions by arguing that neoliberalism is often better understood as a form that can contain the oppositional—old leftist solidarity and new rightist utopias—and fold them into a single moral order. The contemporary situation is seldom best characterized as a battlefield with clearly drawn political dividing lines. Instead, it is fraught with “new obscu-

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1. Pierre Bourdieu, “The Essence of Neoliberalism,” *Le monde diplomatique*, December 1998, [mondediplo.com/1998/12/08bourdieu](http://mondediplo.com/1998/12/08bourdieu).

rities” so opaque that “the very meaning of *left* and *right*” has become difficult to determine.<sup>2</sup> In fact, to call them either Right or Left at all is “not simply misleading, but wrong.”<sup>3</sup> So, how are we to understand how leftists relate to the neoliberalism they so vehemently oppose? And what might Carl Schmitt’s early-twentieth-century reflections on Catholicism’s imperial nature tell us about neoliberalism at the dawn of the twenty-first? To answer these questions, I explore how leftist Italians summon themselves into the neoliberal welfare economy in a manner that is at once critical of neoliberalism yet consonant with it ontologically. I focus ethnographically on the phenomenal rise of the role of leftist citizens’ voluntarism in the privatizing social service economy. These citizen volunteers provide services that the state, whose redistributive mechanisms they had come to believe in and fight for during the twentieth century, is increasingly unwilling or unable to provide. It is in this welfarist domain that the unstable moral and political terrains of our era, and thus the contours of contemporary neoliberalism, are rendered particularly visible.<sup>4</sup>

Such a focus on the Left and its critical-complicit labor in a privatizing “welfare society” offers insight into a peculiar kind of hegemony. Antonio Gramsci’s model of hegemony assumed that an elite “led” the masses into a relation of domination governed by consent. Consent for him was a complex thing, for he recognized that people might disagree ideologically with a prevailing order while signing on, either consciously or inadvertently, to its discourses and practices in ontological terms.<sup>5</sup> The stabilization of a hegemonic project thus occurs not necessarily because it is ideologically coherent. As Gramsci argued, unity had to be

2. Jürgen Habermas, “The New Obscurity: The Crisis of the Welfare State and the Exhaustion of Utopian Energies,” in *The New Conservatism: Cultural Criticism and the Historians’ Debate*, ed. and trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989), 48–70; Claudio Lomnitz, “Foundations of the Latin American Left,” *Public Culture* 19 (2007): 24; Douglas R. Holmes, *Integral Europe: Fast-Capitalism, Multiculturalism, Neofascism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000).

3. Holmes, *Integral Europe*, 13.

4. For the purposes of this article, I define as pertaining to the Left those actors who have emerged from Italy’s communist tradition and whose utopian desires centered on the expansion of the welfare state and its regulatory and redistributive capacities for much of the twentieth century. I define as pertaining to the Right those actors committed to neoliberal reform or, broadly, to the privatization of social services and the concomitant reduction of state spending. In Lombardy these reformers are often self-identifying conservative Catholics. Though it is clearly reductive to equate Catholicism with the Right and communism with the Left, I do so here because many neoliberal reformers in Lombardy identify themselves as conservative Catholics who are invested in the gospel of free marketeering as much as in the recuperation of Catholic social doctrine.

5. Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

built out of difference. Hegemony became “organic,” that is, historically effective, only because it could articulate “different subjects, different identities, different projects, different aspirations” into a single configuration.<sup>6</sup>

But even armed with this complex theory of consent, Gramsci probably could not have anticipated how neoliberalism today articulates with leftist—specifically, anarcho-communist—practices and forms. Indeed, the processes of neoliberalization that I outline here are hegemonic not because they operate through the production of consent, as David Harvey has recently written, but because they put to work those citizens who think of themselves as belonging to an actively oppositional tradition of leftist “solidarity.”<sup>7</sup> It is critique, not consent, that animates citizen volunteers to participate in the privatization of care. Many of the tens of thousands of leftists who are today engaged in the so-called welfare society do not interpret their free labor as beholden to the neoliberal project. On the contrary, they think of their actions as linked to past leftist practices and critiques of commodification and marketization. Many ordinary Italians active in the voluntary sector thus experience neoliberalization not as a radical break, as scholars often describe this era,<sup>8</sup> but as a recuperation and reinvigoration of a deeply rooted solidaristic culture—specifically, of past Italian communist practices oriented around local, autonomous, self-managed, democratic action. At the same time, “solidarity” has long ceased to pertain exclusively to the Left’s narrative repertoire. Rather, it is now part of a master narrative perpetuated by a range of actors in the welfare society, including neoliberal reformers, so much so that it appears to emanate from everywhere and nowhere at once. A trope that circulates across various social and political domains, solidarity draws together disparate projects and agents while seemingly eradicating historical and ideological difference. It is this problem of ventriloquation that leftists struggle with. They see that the multiple summonings of “solidaristic citizens” provide the grounds for the mobilization of voluntary labor and thus the withdrawal of state provisioning. Yet their political commitments, deeply rooted in Italy’s communist past, do not allow them to withdraw from the new poverties that cuts in public funding have spawned. The Left has thus, ironically, become an ambivalently complicit force in the neoliberalization of care, moved by a sense of hope grounded in the possi-

6. Stuart Hall, “Gramsci and Us,” in *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left* (London: Verso, 1988), 166.

7. David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

8. Pierre Bourdieu, *Acts of Resistance: Against the Tyranny of the Market*, trans. Richard Nice (New York: New Press, 1998); Harvey, *Brief History*.

bility of historical rectification — “a second chance at achieving some previously derailed project.”<sup>9</sup>

My attention to the social life of a leftist culture of dissent offers insight not only into neoliberalism as extraordinarily expansive and malleable politically — a capacity that other scholars have commented on.<sup>10</sup> It also allows for an exploration of neoliberalism that pays attention to the simultaneity and mutual dependency of forms and forces that scholars frequently think of in oppositional terms. As I will show, some neoliberal projects contain a critique of themselves. That is, they can encompass critiques derived from traditions directly opposed to them. This is so because the neoliberal project I outline here operates through more than mere market logics. It contains forms of reason and social relations that appear contrary to it, thus allowing the disparate aspirations of both those “leading” and those “led” to be brought “in concord” on an ontological level.

At this point *Roman Catholicism and Political Form*, a brief essay written by Schmitt in 1923, becomes relevant. Schmitt develops a theory of hegemony that, like Gramsci’s, makes it possible for seemingly incommensurable cultural materials to be thought of as tied together into one formation, or what he calls a *complexio oppositorum* (complex of opposites). For “imperialism must be a *complexio oppositorum* or else it is not true imperialism.”<sup>11</sup> According to Schmitt, the paradigmatic imperial force is Catholicism in its miraculous elasticity and ambiguity, its capacity to enter into coalitions with the most antithetical political and social forms. There are no opposites that Catholicism cannot encompass — democracy and authoritarianism; rationalism and irrationality; romanticism and science; masculinity and femininity. It is, Schmitt writes, a symbolic hermaphrodite.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Catholicism makes no attempt at Hegelian synthesis but leaves enough space for these opposites “to retain the tension of oppositionality.” Instead of neutralizing antagonisms, the *complexio* “nurtures and accentuates them; instead of totalizing or inserting the particulars under the umbrella of a single

9. Lomnitz, “Foundations of the Latin American Left,” 23.

10. Andrew Barry, Thomas Osborne, and Nikolas Rose, eds., *Foucault and Political Reason: Liberalism, Neo-liberalism, and Rationalities of Government* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Aihwa Ong, “Experiments with Freedom: Milieus of the Human,” *American Literary History* 18 (2006): 229–44.

11. Carl Schmitt, *Römischer Katholizismus und politische Form* (*Roman Catholicism and Political Form*) (Stuttgart: Klett/Cotta, 1923), 8–11.

12. Schmitt, *Römischer Katholizismus*, 12–13.

concept, it permits them to clash and derives its political energy from this enduring standoff.”<sup>13</sup>

This Janus-facedness is the result not of mere tactical collusion but of Catholicism’s hinging on the strict implementation of the principle of representation. It has the strength of a political-judicial form that contains the oppositional within itself. The office of the priesthood, for example, though comparable to modern bureaucratic office, is not impersonal but is linked through an uninterrupted chain to the divine, an authority from above, that is, to the personal mandate and concrete person of Christ. The priest’s office exists independently of charisma and is endowed with a dignity abstracted from and transcending his concrete persona. Catholicism as political form thus embodies both the rational-judicial and the dignity of the *civitas humana*, both the technocratic and the moral, both the concrete and the abstract. Its form is uniquely generative because it encompasses incommensurables while keeping them in productive tension.

Gramsci made an astonishingly similar observation about Catholicism when he argued that it uses “arms stolen from the arsenal of its adversaries.” Yet Gramsci interpreted this as an instantiation of the church’s defensiveness, when it “no longer defines the terrain and the means of struggles and must accept the terrain imposed upon it from the outside,” thus losing “the autonomy of movement and initiative.”<sup>14</sup> For Schmitt, instead, it was this very capacity that signaled Catholicism’s immeasurable strength. What made the imperial imperial was its capacity to entail its own negations.

A similar suturing of incommensurables occurs in the neoliberal Italian welfare society. As a project propelled by for-profit and nonprofit mechanisms alike, such a society is animated, as both its promoters and its critics recognize, not by mere utilitarian calculation and instrumentality but by compassion and solidarity, not by mere market logics but by moral logics. This neoliberalism entails a model of man not only as *homo oeconomicus* but as *homo relationalis*. The market neoliberal, in other words, is accompanied by what one might call a moral neoliberal. Yet this very attempt at containment provides the grounds for failure and the opening up of spaces of hope. The result is the somewhat unexpected reinvigoration of politics at the very moment that politics often seems irredeemably lost.

13. Michael Marder, “Carl Schmitt’s ‘Cosmopolitan Restaurant’: Culture, Multiculturalism, and *Complexio Oppositorum*,” *Telos*, no. 142 (2008): 29, 30.

14. Antonio Gramsci, notebook I (1929–30), in *Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Joseph A. Buttigieg (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 1:224.

### “Welfare Society”

The late 1980s and the 1990s are remembered in Italy as a time when privatization became “drastic” and “generalized.”<sup>15</sup> Rhetorics of welfare-state building were replaced with the argument that the state ought not to have a monopoly over care. Reformers cast the privatization of social services onto a burgeoning nonprofit and voluntary sector as a new democratic collaboration between the state and “solidaristic” society, whose latent vitalism had slumbered far too long under the heavy blanket of welfare-state paternalism.<sup>16</sup> Roberto Formigoni, the president of the northern region of Lombardy, where I did my fieldwork, frequently argued that the modern state had taken away the people’s sovereignty because it had not trusted them in their maturity and creativity. For others, the state had always been too invested in “disciplining and controlling” the good works of private organizations peopled by “free,” “autonomous,” and “self-managed” citizens.<sup>17</sup> By summoning new sovereignties and social solidarities that challenged those of the modern state, neoliberalization moved away from nationally scaled Keynesian welfare toward decentralized forms of provisioning purportedly animated from “below” by a new ethics and pragmatics of “active citizenship.” All were now equally responsible for the common good, and the state was merely one “partner” among many.

With this rhetoric came a deep structural reorganization. As public funding decreased and hiring freezes prevented local governments from providing new public services directly,<sup>18</sup> provisioning devolved to voluntary agencies, nonprofits, social cooperatives, Catholic institutions, and trade unions. All were made subject

15. Ugo Ascoli, Emmanuele Pavolini, and Costanzo Ranci, “The New Partnership: The Changing Relationship between State and the Third Sector in the Scenario of New Social Policies in Italy,” in *Dilemmas of the Welfare Mix: The New Structure of Welfare in an Era of Privatization*, ed. Ugo Ascoli and Costanzo Ranci (New York: Kluwer, 2002), 135.

16. Social services in most European countries, including Italy, were always provided by a mix of public and private (family, church, etc.) institutions. Thus the model of privatization I am outlining here is not simply one in which services are outsourced from the public to the private sector. Rather, one public-private constellation is replaced with another through the appearance of the third sector. One goal of privatization in Italy is “defamilializing” care services to overcome the country’s heavy reliance on female labor in the home. It also aims at filling gaps in social service provisioning, gaps aggravated by a growing demand spurred by changing family forms and the aging of the population.

17. Luigi Leone, “Aiuti nei secoli: Una storia lunga e affascinante” (“Social Provisioning over the Centuries: A Long and Fascinating Story”), *Politiche sociali news: Regione Lombardia* 4 (2002): 8.

18. Ascoli, Pavolini, and Ranci, “New Partnership,” 142–43.

to market mechanisms. Not only did these groups bid competitively against one another and the public and private sectors for public contracts, but they operated according to new management procedures previously typical of the private sector.<sup>19</sup> Privatization came with a predictable set of problems. Local authorities reduced funding without serious planning and monitoring, awarded contracts to the lowest bidder, and paid little attention to the quality of services.<sup>20</sup> Despite new state regulations aimed at halting the deterioration of services, privatization left citizens with the sense that a historically unreliable state was further abandoning them at a moment of increased vulnerability.

The inclusion of nonprofit and voluntary actors in the planning and provisioning of welfare is a way for Italy to introduce “softer” varieties of privatization. This so-called third sector has become a vehicle through which European societies more generally are imagining their welfarist futures, wherein productivity is wedded to social solidarity, the market to moral community, and efficiency to a caring, collective order. What is emerging is a hybrid labor market fraught with tensions embedded in the term *service economy* itself. On the one hand, Europe is seeing the rise of a sector that Jacques Delors’s 1993 white paper on growth, competitiveness, and employment insisted was one of the principal vessels for job growth in the European Union (EU). Many critics expect the emergent care sector to become a highly exploitative, low-wage, feminized social service industry. On the other hand, it is precisely this service economy that the EU associates with moral redemption and relational wholeness—work that quite literally provides service to the community. It is the neoliberalization of care that will make European societies work and cohere.<sup>21</sup>

The symbolic center of European Third Wayism<sup>22</sup> is occupied by the figure of the volunteer as paradigmatic citizen. The European Commission argues that social services should be organized according to the “solidarity principle,” not to market principles, because they have a “special role as pillars of the European society and economy.” The third sector should therefore include “the participa-

19. Ascoli, Pavolini, and Ranci, “New Partnership,” 135.

20. Ascoli, Pavolini, and Ranci, “New Partnership,” 149.

21. Cf. European Commission, “Communication from the Commission: Implementing the Community Lisbon Programme; Social Services of General Interest in the European Union,” COM(2006) 177 final, SEC(2006) 516, europa.eu/scadplus/leg/en/lvb/l33230.htm.

22. As Nikolas Rose explains, the term has a long genealogy. Most simply, and in the 1998 words of former British Labor home secretary Jack Straw, the Third Way is “a clear coherent route between the Right . . . and the old, neo-Marxist Left” (quoted in “Community, Citizenship, and the Third Way,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 43 [2000]: 1396).

tion of voluntary workers, expression of citizenship capacity.”<sup>23</sup> Former British foreign secretary Jack Straw similarly argued that volunteering was an expression of “the essential act of citizenship” and that “the most important example of our [Third Way] approach is our commitment greatly to extend the idea and practice of volunteering—of people doing something for each other rather than having the State doing it for them and so diminishing them.”<sup>24</sup> Both statements wed free labor to moral community, exploitation to moralization. The volunteer, in other words, represents the nexus where the market and the moral neoliberal appear with greatest clarity.

The European commitment to Third Wayism articulates productively with what Ben Fine has called post-Washington consensus neoliberalism, which, rather than privilege the market, fetishizes “society” as the primary vehicle to resolve social problems.<sup>25</sup> With its integration of “the social” into economic analyses, the post-Washington consensus represents a departure for mainstream economics and its analytic distinction between “economy” and “society” as separate domains. Economic theory’s sudden interest in the social “significantly widens the explanatory scope of neoclassical economic principles.”<sup>26</sup> Rather than focus exclusively on “rational” market relations, the rise of the post-Washington consensus social heralds a “heightened awareness in policy and academic circles of real people’s values (not the utility functions of *homo oeconomicus*), [and of] how people interact in their daily lives (locally, in families and work groups, not just as buyers, sellers, and citizens).”<sup>27</sup> This celebration of “people’s values” has allowed for the integration of a vastly expanded model of the human in economic discourse. The science of *homo oeconomicus* now includes *homo relationalis*—humans who relate to one another not through self-interest but through affective dispositions such as solidarity and “trust,” as the premier theorist of social capital, Robert D. Putnam, has put it.<sup>28</sup> With trustful, solidaristic relations now considered key to the wealth of nations, affect has become a productive force. The post-Washington consensus social is a far cry from Margaret Thatcher’s proclamation that society does not exist. For “society” now rears its head in profoundly transformed ways.

23. European Commission, “Implementing the Community Lisbon Programme,” 516.

24. Quoted in Rose, “Community, Citizenship, and the Third Way,” 1404.

25. Ben Fine, *Social Capital versus Social Theory: Political Economy and Social Science at the Turn of the Millennium* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

26. Fine, *Social Capital*, 10–11.

27. S. Bowles, “‘Social Capital’ and Community Governance,” *Focus* 20, no. 3 (1999): 6.

28. See Robert D. Putnam, Robert Leonardi, and Raffaella Y. Nanetti, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993).

Promoted as an adjective rather than a noun, the social comes as an addendum and descriptor rather than as an object *sui generis*, a relation produced by participatory citizens rather than an a priori domain into which the state interjects.<sup>29</sup>

The intersection of the EU's Third Wayism with post-Washington consensus economic theory finds particular expression in Italy, where the rise of society as a social panacea is rendered in highly moralized registers that spring directly from the country's Catholic and communist traditions. Here the public stabilization of the welfare society as a desirable form of welfare provisioning hinges on a deep categorical distinction between "the social" and "the market."<sup>30</sup> It is, for example, commonplace for observers across the political spectrum to argue that the "culture of the Third Sector" distinguishes itself from the market by its altruism, gifting, reciprocity, and "attention to the human being."<sup>31</sup> One leftist daily presented the third sector as an expression of a new form of moral communion, a "utopia" in the face of "total social disaggregation." It was a way to prevent a "social apocalypse" in a world where the word *welfare* has become anathema.<sup>32</sup> Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, arguing from the perspective of the Right, similarly contended that the third sector represents "a veritable army of peace that works for the project of solidarity and for a higher quality of life." His vice minister of welfare, Grazia Sestini, noted that it is an expression of the "moral and economic wealth" of the country.<sup>33</sup>

This crass society-market distinction effaces the fact that new kinds of bureaucratization and marketization have generated pervasive institutional isomorphisms between nonprofit and for-profit agencies.<sup>34</sup> Yet effacement is precisely the point. The distinction between a nonprofit moral order and a for-profit market order, between *homo relationalis* and *homo oeconomicus*, is crucial because it allows

29. Nikolas Rose, "Death of the Social? Reconfiguring the Territory of Government," *Economy and Society* 25 (1996): 327–56.

30. In fact, this categorical distinction is triangular and entails the distinction of "society" from the market *and* the state. The distinction between "society" and "the state" comes with its own set of oppositions, which I deal with in "The Moral Neoliberal: Welfare State and Ethical Citizenship in Contemporary Italy" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2007).

31. Pierpaolo Donati, *Sociologia del terzo settore (Sociology of the Third Sector)* (Milan: Carocci, 2002), 31.

32. La Repubblica, "Gli angeli del terzo settore ma non è solo volontariato" ("The Angels of the Third Sector Are Not Only Volunteers"), January 10, 1999, [www.repubblica.it/online/volontariato/inchiesta/inchiesta1/inchiesta1.html](http://www.repubblica.it/online/volontariato/inchiesta/inchiesta1/inchiesta1.html).

33. Silvio Berlusconi, *La Padania*, February 11, 2003, 7; Gabriella Meroni, "Grazia Sestini: Caro Cofferati, sei un conservatore" ("Grazia Sestini: Dear Cofferati, You Are Conservative"), *VITA.it*, October 29, 2001, [www.vita.it/articolo/index.php3?NEWSID=10410&H](http://www.vita.it/articolo/index.php3?NEWSID=10410&H).

34. Ascoli and Ranci, *Dilemmas of the Welfare Mix*, 18.

for privatization and the decrease in public funding to be sublimated into visions of moral order. This neoliberal project thus appeals to the “instincts” of the Left and the Right because it evokes not individual freedom, as Harvey argues,<sup>35</sup> but *homo relationalis* engaged in a new ethic of duty and connection. The rise of the citizen bound to fellow citizens inserts a fantasy of moral community into the heart of neoliberal reform—a fantasy hugely consequential for the reorganization of welfare and the relationship of the Left to this process.

### Alchemies of Solidarity

The idea of the volunteer as paradigmatic citizen has emerged with particular clarity in Italy, the only country in Europe that treats volunteering with a distinct body of law. Voluntarism has also begun to play an important part in service provisioning. Indeed, as the Ministry of Welfare put it somewhat defensively in 2004, “there is nothing wrong” with volunteers playing a role previously reserved to state institutions. As they “engage[e] with these public institutions in an authentic relationship of solidarity,” and as they are “recognized as having a dignity equal to that of the public sector,” volunteer organizations play a pivotal role “in a moment of a grave crisis of values.”<sup>36</sup> One might interpret this phenomenon sociologically, given that one-quarter of Italy’s nonprofit organizations rely almost exclusively on volunteers.<sup>37</sup> But this interpretation obscures the *ontological* debate at stake here. For at the core of this neoliberal project lies the production of anticapitalist narratives and practices.

In 1991 a key national law used the dual registers of *gratuità* and *solidarietà* to frame volunteering in terms that deeply resonate with Italy’s vibrant Catholic and socialist traditions.<sup>38</sup> Volunteering, the law’s article 2 states, is an act of giving that is “personal,” “spontaneous,” and “free” (*gratuito*). It is conducted “exclusively for the purpose of ‘solidarity’ [*solidarietà*].” The law thus gestured toward two complex concepts with enormous cultural resonance. *Gratuità*, translated as “free-gifting” or “free-giving” in Christian theology and considered essential to the biblical revelation, circulates widely in the Italian public sphere as a reminder of the virtuous practices that citizens ought to engage in. As Pope John Paul II

35. Harvey, *Brief History*, 40–41.

36. Italian Ministry of Welfare (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali), “Volontariato News,” [www.welfare.gov.it/Sociale/volontariato/default.htm](http://www.welfare.gov.it/Sociale/volontariato/default.htm) (accessed October 14, 2005).

37. Costanzo Ranci, “Democracy at Work: Social Participation and the ‘Third Sector’ in Italy,” *Daedalus* 130 (2001): 73–84.

38. “Legge quadro sul volontariato,” also known as the Legge 266/1991.

insisted, “Society needs to convert to the idea of unselfish giving” and “authentic love” in order to oppose a world dominated by a “logic motivated exclusively by the pursuit of profit and gain at any price.”<sup>39</sup>

It was the Catholics who first responded to these early legal-theological calls to citizens’ action. After all, this segment of the population has performed good works for centuries. In contrast, the socialists, having long derided charity, first interpreted this legal sanctification of voluntarism as a move toward a culture of beneficence that would take away from state-mediated forms of welfare.<sup>40</sup> But by the time I arrived in Italy in 2003, voluntarism was also very much considered an expression of leftist *solidarietà*, even as many leftists were aware of the shifting institutional structures of which the state’s mobilization of voluntarism is a part. Perched between the sense that their free labor was being exploited by a withdrawing state and the recognition that they had become increasingly invested in this citizenship practice, many leftists I saw struggled to discursively fix the highly unstable meaning of *solidarity* in order to assert ownership over this term. Theirs was a proprietary struggle over historical origins at a moment when solidarity was being ventriloquized by many disparate actors, including neoliberal reformers.

Leftists thus often insisted on differentiating solidarity from *gratuità*, which they tied to pity rather than to respect, condescension rather than a commitment to equality and “brotherhood.” The stakes were high, because they could not allow themselves to think of themselves as participants in the creation of a new welfare order that, while using the sign of solidarity as a foundational principle, reoriented their emancipatory politics toward the neoliberalization of care. The attempt to differentiate their practice from that of the Catholics and neoliberal reformers was core to an unfolding interpretive struggle over whether their free labor could be classified as “charity” or “solidarity,” as an expression of mere beneficence or of a resolutely secular egalitarian ethos, as beholden to the neoliberal project or as opposed to it. Of course, the insistence on this distinction erased the fact that Catholicism, as *complexio oppositorum*, is perfectly capable of containing both beneficence and egalitarianism, both conservative and radi-

39. John Paul II, *Osservatore romano*, February 13, 2002, [www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/audiences/2002/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_aud\\_20020213\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/audiences/2002/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_20020213_en.html).

40. Thanks to Costanzo Ranci for this information. I would argue that this suspicion has deep historical roots. For the original leftist critique of voluntarism came from Gramsci, who condemned the massive fascist mobilization of the “holy rabble” of volunteers (Italo Balbo, quoted in Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith [New York: International, 1997], 203).

cally progressive politics, as Italy's vibrant Catho-communist culture can attest. It also erased the fact that both communists and Catholics have always placed great emphasis on solidarity, or "solidarism," as the Catholics sometimes call it. For both, solidarity offers "powerful charismatic and Utopian visions, the one extraterrestrial, the other in the Motherland of world revolution."<sup>41</sup> In fact, the church's claiming of solidarity as "undoubtedly a Christian virtue" was reiterated in a 1987 papal encyclical.<sup>42</sup>

Rather than political distance, solidarity can signify coherence across right and left domains.<sup>43</sup> After all, the welfare society relies on a particular process of abstraction that allows disparate parties to agree minimally on what the term means. What is abstracted from *solidarietà* is its potential to operate as a sign of anticapitalist dissent. This is the case not only in leftist circles. Everyone talks about voluntarism as if it existed in contradistinction to a world governed by the logic of profit. Under the "Charter of Values for Volunteering," used repeatedly in publicly funded training courses that I attended in Milan, volunteering "entails the absence of economic gain, the freedom from any forms of power, and a renouncement of any direct or indirect advantage. [It] is the credible testament to a freedom from the logic of individualism and economic utilitarianism. It refutes models of society that are centered exclusively on consumerism."<sup>44</sup> Volunteers, in other words, are presented as an expression of what the charter calls *l'uomo solidale*, "solidaristic man." Volunteers themselves reproduce this fantasy of anticapitalist agency, too, by representing their labor as *lavoro relazionale*, "relational labor."

What is imaginatively fused by very different social actors is very different kinds of affect—compassion on the one hand, feelings of brotherhood on the other—all of which these parties agree produce one effect, that of solidarity. From this fusion emerges the fantasy that all citizens are alike in their desire to build "social cohesion" through solidaristic action. The Left and the Right

41. Paul Ginsborg, *Italy and Its Discontents: Family, Civil Society, and State, 1980–2001* (London: Penguin, 2001), 103.

42. See John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis* (*On Social Concern*), December 30, 1987, [www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_30121987\\_sollicitudo-rei-socialis\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30121987_sollicitudo-rei-socialis_en.html).

43. In *Integral Europe*, his fascinating study of political "integralism" in Europe, Holmes first notes that solidarity's heteroglossia has caused disparate political projects to resemble one another in almost eerie ways.

44. "Charter of Values for Volunteering" ("Carta dei valori del volontariato"), [www.fivol.it/cartavalori/carta\\_valori.html](http://www.fivol.it/cartavalori/carta_valori.html).

can be imagined as sharing a deep ontological commitment to putting to work *homo relationalis*, all in the name of the (moral) wealth of the nation. Solidarity helps suture vastly different political histories and ideological projects and brings diverse interpretive communities together, often very uneasily, in their willingness to provide free labor. Solidarity is the currency that makes commensurable the incommensurable. It is the emotional material out of which the neoliberal welfare society is wrought.

The fantasy of anticapitalist voluntaristic agency is frequently also collapsed with the third sector as a whole and naturalized through various discursive confluences on the part of social scientists. The sociologist Lucia Boccacin uses the register of familial love to describe the hyperintimate model of stranger sociality that the welfare society relies on. She writes that while the “direct gift-giving relationship occurs quasi naturally” in the family, it can also occur “between strangers” in the third sector and thus has “positive repercussions for the reinforcement of social ties.”<sup>45</sup> She thereby lays bare another core aim of the welfare society—to redistribute affect away from dwindling forms of familial care toward the non-profit and voluntary sector and thus to privatize the private sphere, as it were.

This public communicative work performs an alchemy that makes the privatization of care seem inspired by and grounded in anticapitalist logics—an alchemy that infuses the welfare society with quasi-salvational, “mystical,” “magical” value.<sup>46</sup> This is precisely the conceit of this neoliberal project—that what is emergent is not a compassionate and therefore seemingly benign variety of capitalism but something directly opposed to it. This conceit has drawn tens of thousands of members of Italy’s critical and unruly Left into the privatizing welfare society. Yet rather than participate passively in this process, they perform huge amounts of ideological work to craft a narrative to navigate this obscure terrain in ways that simultaneously confirm and negate their past leftist commitments.

Their narrative is twofold and thus as ambivalent as the historical moment they find themselves in. On the one hand, the leftists I worked with insisted that their activities were firmly grounded in past solidaristic practices. They labored to “propose an origin” for the indeterminate meaning of solidarity by imagina-

45. Lucia Boccacin, *Il terzo settore tra le generazioni: Un’analisi delle relazioni tra i soggetti del “welfare” plurale (The Third Sector between Generations: An Analysis of the Relationships between the Actors within a Plural Welfare System)* (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 2003), 26–28.

46. On the welfare society’s “mystical” value, see Rossana Trifiletti, “Restructuring Social Care in Italy,” in *Gender, Social Care, and Welfare State Restructuring in Europe*, ed. Jane Lewis (Aldershot, U.K.: Ashgate, 1998), 180. On its “magical” value, see Ranci, “Democracy at Work,” 83.

tively wedding their current political subjectivities to their past.<sup>47</sup> On the other hand, their labor was an expression of a generic ethos that transcends political difference through a shared struggle against alienation. It is precisely this indeterminacy—of whether voluntarism is a manifestation of a true leftist ethos or part of an apolitical (or “social”) turn toward “care” and “compassion”—that allows leftists to be agentive subjects under neoliberal conditions. It is this indeterminacy that enables them to participate in and critique neoliberalization at the same time.

### **Aftereffects of Utopian Practice**

I was sitting in the slightly scruffy office of the Association for the Self-Management of Services and Solidarity (AUSER) in late 2003. AUSER is a huge voluntary organization with about forty thousand active volunteers and hundreds of local offices, including one in Sesto San Giovanni, a town on the outskirts of Milan. AUSER Sesto’s office walls were plastered with posters reading *La solidarietà non ha confini* (Solidarity Has No Boundaries), *Il valore sociale della cittadinanza attiva* (The Social Value of Active Citizenship), and *Il dire e il fare* (The Word and the Deed)—the third directly derivative of the Marxist insistence on the unity of theory and practice and thus a potent reminder that AUSER is deeply rooted in Italy’s communist tradition. AUSER was founded in 1992 by Europe’s largest trade union, Spi-Cgil, the pensioners’ union of the ex-communist Italian General Confederation of Labor. It today draws on the free labor of a generation of highly politicized and socially conscious retired factory workers who self-organize in small neighborhood associations. Its volunteers put to work what they call their “political passions” not on factory floors but through service organizations embedded in local neighborhoods; not through industrial work but through the labor of care. They keep the elderly company, run errands for them, take them out for walks, drive them to the hospital, and bring them meals. To do so, the majority of AUSER’s hundreds of organizations have contracted with local governments across the political spectrum, thus deeply implicating themselves in the making of the welfare society.

I asked Angelo, a volunteer, how he felt about his organization providing ser-

47. Susan Gal, “Movements of Feminism: The Circulation of Discourses about Women,” in *Recognition Struggles and Social Movements: Contested Identities, Agency, and Power*, ed. Barbara Hobson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 98.

vices at the very moment that public funds were being cut. He responded with hesitation. “How to put it?” he replied. “I feel this duty. One must do it. You can’t withdraw from these things, you have to do it. . . . It’s an ethical imperative. It’s beyond one’s will. It’s not like I could stop doing it. I can’t *not* do it.” This statement is striking not only because Angelo describes his volunteer activities as propelled by a force outside his own will, that is, as not voluntaristic at all, but also because the double negation at the end of his impassioned answer reveals a historically specific structure of feeling organized around a simultaneity of sensibility, a disparity in awareness and motivation. Its structure brought to light a fundamental ambivalence that many members of the Left sense as they respond to the withdrawing state’s summoning of solidaristic man. Angelo recognized that his voluntarism was a form of free labor that allowed for the withdrawal of state resources. Yet he wished to act in light of the new state apathy. Angelo’s political consciousness prevented him from withdrawing from this process. This historical moment allowed him instead to recuperate and reinvigorate his rootedness within a particular genealogy of communist ethical practice, even as this reinvigorated practice squarely situated him within neoliberal welfarism. Angelo’s was thus a dual, highly contradictory, fundamentally Gramscian consciousness. His was a pessimism of the intellect that recognized the historical limitations and ironies of his activities. But he also exhibited an optimism of the will, acting even in circumscribed circumstances in ways that were true to himself and his past. He was acutely aware of larger structural forces even as he sought to be an agentive rather than an apathetic subject. I make this point to insist that the people I encountered were far from coherent subjects in whose souls neoliberal norms were indissolubly inscribed.<sup>48</sup> Rather, they not only recognized historical paradox but saw that they consisted of multiple, sometimes contradictory, sensations and motivations. They were not singular and disciplined subjects but highly self-reflexive divided agents who found themselves caught in the bind of the historical situation.

Yet sometimes my interlocutors articulated a much more conciliatory account of the situation. Solidarity, these leftists acknowledged, was not their prerogative. Using the phrase *La solidarietà non ha colore* (Solidarity Has No Color) in the sense that solidarity was not owned by any political party, they maintained that it could be practiced by people from across the political spectrum. This phrase—and the use of solidarity to index the apolitical nature of their activity—was the condition under which they felt that their organization could legitimately contract

48. Rose, “Community, Citizenship, and the Third Way,” 1409.

with local governments of different political persuasions.<sup>49</sup> Their representation of solidarity as an apolitical, generically shared affective interiority helped erase the fact that the social, political, and economic parameters under which their solidaristic actions took place had radically changed.

Most often, however, these leftists insisted that their activities were made possible only by their embeddedness in a leftist past. For them, the feelings that propelled them today were identical to those that had propelled them in decades past. Their solidaristic activity was, they said, an expression of the Left's cohesion over time. "I'll give a few banal examples," one volunteer explained.

If someone in the factory was in need — say, he was getting married — we'd collect money for him. For those who were ill, we'd collect money. And factories that tried to fire people were immediately occupied by workers, all of whom also brought financial contributions. These things seem banal, but they're important in the concrete. This idea of solidarity is present and has always been present among our workers in the union.

Such imaginaries of seamlessness were made possible by these leftists' insistence on the feeling of solidarity as an immutable, transhistorical leftist force. As one volunteer put it, everything they did today was simply the latest reformulation of a "passion" they had borne through long years of political struggle. His comment was the first in a series of similar references I heard that are part of a deeply routinized sentimental discourse among the Italian Left. The reference to political passion was often evoked by volunteers to talk about the structure of feeling that had sustained their personal and collective histories as unionists, party activists, and now volunteers. The feeling of solidarity was what gave them a sense of diachronic unity in the midst of economic and political upheaval.

This idea of political passion animating leftist practice goes at least as far back as Gramsci himself, for whom there was, of course, no such thing as a transcendental, immutable sentiment that united humanity. Rather, feelings sprang from the historically determined social relations that brought the proletariat into being. As the result of social and economic context, feeling was relative to a particular time, place, and practice. Gramsci was hesitant to make any predictions regarding the "sentiments, the passions" that were molded in the "incandescent furnace" of the coming revolution. But he did make one prediction. "One solitary sentiment is today proven; become now a constant, so that it characterizes the working class: it is soli-

49. One might argue, of course, that Italian corporatism has long allowed for parts of the Italian Left to be deeply entangled with the state apparatus. But for much of the twentieth century these entanglements helped *sustain* the Keynesian welfare state.

darity.” Solidarity was the constant flame burning in the heart of the proletariat.<sup>50</sup> When leftists insisted that the same affective interiority had propelled them over time, they reiterated this Gramscian theory of proletarian feeling, fitting their free labor into categories politically and emotionally meaningful to them.

They felt uneasy when I reminded them that they were now providing services similar to the charitable activities of the Catholics. They insisted, as one woman did, that “the Catholics do *gratuità*. . . . We instead do *solidarietà*, which is quite different and has different types of meanings. It’s a whole different way of behavior. . . . We do it with love, but we never have pity in our hearts. . . . *Gratuità* is linked to pity, whereas *solidarietà* is not.” These volunteers were committed to a particular form of affective interiority from which human equality sprang. As another volunteer put it to me, “Every gesture we perform comes from the heart. It comes from our desire to see a brother doing well. We don’t go to church, but when I see a brother in difficulty, I help him out. Before this, we used to call these types of activities ‘Christian gestures.’ But today . . . we engage in what we call gestures of love and brotherhood.” Politics, it seems, has become the struggle over determining the content of one’s heart.

Importantly, leftists just as often presented themselves as wedded to a particular form and scale of political mobilization. The volunteers often reminded me that their labor was not only thinkable but doable for reasons linked to historical practice. What bound them together were past experiences in the *consigli di fabbrica*, the factory council movement they all participated in during the late 1960s, when working-class revolts in the country’s northern cities exploded. It was a time when workers challenged both the highly repressive postwar political and economic order and undemocratic union structures by demanding housing, services, education, and basic infrastructures.<sup>51</sup> In gesturing toward the councils, these leftists referred to a radical system of representation and democratic self-management that harked back to Gramsci, who had developed a theory of self-managed proletarian action to critique V. I. Lenin’s and Leon Trotsky’s theories of the central role of the Communist Party in the revolution. For Gramsci, the point of entry into the new utopian civilization and a “genuine worker’s democracy” was not the centralized and hierarchized union or party but the factory councils.<sup>52</sup>

50. Gwyn A. Williams, *Proletarian Order: Antonio Gramsci, Factory Councils, and the Origins of Italian Communism, 1911–1921* (London: Pluto, 1975), 226.

51. Robert Lumley, *States of Emergency: Cultures of Revolt in Italy from 1968 to 1978* (London: Verso, 1990).

52. Williams, *Proletarian Order*, 103.

Inspired by the French philosopher and theorist of anarcho-syndicalism George Sorel, and modeled after the Russian soviets and the English shop-steward system, Gramsci's councils were meant to organize schools in factories, create social and savings funds, and establish cooperatives and factory canteens linked to local cooperative alliances.<sup>53</sup> The road to revolution would be paved by solidaristic and democratic *prassi* (praxis) from below.

The early-twentieth-century factory council movement, many of whose most dedicated members were anarcho-syndicalists, was soon shattered. Its ethos was further erased as the Italian Communist Party reconstituted itself after fascism. After all, the movement had flown in the face of the union's and the party's higher echelons, which feared the emergence of a "mindless," "infantile" mass outside their control.<sup>54</sup> The movement reemerged only in the late 1960s, a time remembered and cherished by my interlocutors in the most embodied and visceral terms as exhilarating democratic action "from below." For them, their voluntarism perpetuated precisely this morphology of past leftist action. Yet it is this very morphology, readily available in the communist Left's submerged anarcho-syndicalist past, that the rescaled post-Keynesian welfare society relies on.

### **W(h)ither Politics?**

There were moments when the moral and political obscurities that the Left wrestled with were transcended, when leftists managed to recapture the meaning of solidarity and exercise some control over its public production, circulation, and consumption. They did so by putting their position as virtuous citizens to work in ways that had explicit political effects. Indeed, the role of volunteers as paradigmatically solidaristic subjects opened up new avenues through which to champion the rights of the poor. Thus while organizations like AUSER were emblematic of the active and caring citizenry that the Ministry of Welfare appealed to, their critical historical consciousness also enabled them to question the very parameters that had brought their highly moralized subjectivities into being. In effect, the moralization of voluntarism as an expression of anticapitalist ethics allowed volunteers (and members of the nonprofit world more generally) to identify with, claim, and deploy this mantle of morality in order to critique the state's actions. At the very moment that the third sector was publicly codified as a realm of pure virtue within the symbolic economy of the welfare society, its members spoke back in that register.

53. Williams, *Proletarian Order*, 228–29.

54. Williams, *Proletarian Order*, 175.

As citizens purportedly operating outside capitalist logics, they voiced a critique that could not be dismissed. For volunteers won many a battle on the regional and national front because they could deploy virtue as a strategic political tool. For example, volunteer organizations often used their virtuousness in their critique of public institutions by claiming an expertise that was at least as authoritative as the state's knowledge claims, if not more so. Government representatives, for example, frequently referred to volunteer organizations as more "proximate" and "relationally and spatially closer" to the population. Volunteer representatives deployed precisely this language to represent themselves as experts whose knowledge was based on true relationality—that is, on a spatial and emotional proximity to the poor and needy. State representatives, often quite vulnerable to critique, were constantly engaged in a vibrant, highly politicized public debate about rising poverty levels and the politics of neglect perpetuated by public institutions. Indeed, their location as hypervirtuous citizens of the welfare society has allowed organizations such as AUSER to champion the rights of the underprivileged and to argue for the "intrinsic right to care." What is rearing its head at such moments is the "modernist" language of solidarity, based on the social rights of citizens and the state's duty to care for them.

In short, neoliberalism as *complexio oppositorum* is not totalitarian in the sense that it treats dissent with violent intolerance. On the contrary, the symbolic repositioning of society's elements through marketization and moralization provides the parameters through which powerful critique can be voiced and *must* be heard. Yet these moments of critique both undermine *and* reproduce the neoliberal welfare society's fantasy of an active, solidaristic citizenry. At the very moment that the Left ventriloquized this ideology, it did two things simultaneously: created the grounds for hope *and* fed into the welfare society's fantasy of *homo relationalis*. Thus dissent both undermined and reproduced, unmade and made, the neoliberal.

### **Hermaphrodite**

Schmitt's musings on Catholicism were intricately interwoven with his familiar lament over the disenchantment of the world and the "mechanization" of politics. The reigning power had aligned itself with little more than "economic technical thought," a self-referential, depoliticized form that knows only one kind of representation—technical precision. The alignment of politics with economics had emptied politics of its meaning, because pure economic thinking could never represent anything but itself in its materiality—there was nothing human or

meaningful outside or “above” it. For “machines cannot represent”; they have no tradition, no history.<sup>55</sup> Politics would have to reach beyond the limits of rational-economic thought and begin to represent more than the poverties of rational utilitarianism and instrumentalism. A new order would have to arise that would not “exhaust itself in mere production and consumption processes” but instead become “formal in the Catholic sense.”<sup>56</sup>

What Schmitt could not foresee was the transformation of economic technical thought itself. The welfare society that I have outlined here is exemplary of precisely this alchemy. As a project, it is so transformative because it bursts the seams of rational-economic self-referentiality and gestures beyond the self-contained machine. It moves beyond mere market rationality, instrumentalism, and utilitarianism and beyond commodification and consumption. Instead, the persuasiveness of the welfare society hinges on its capacity to signify both the rational-technocratic and the utopian. This is not Bourdieu’s “utopia of unlimited exploitation.”<sup>57</sup> Rather, it is akin to Schmitt’s hermaphrodite in that it exceeds pure market fundamentalism and encompasses its negation—an idea of the decommodified life and of a moral community of human connection and relationality opposed to human alienation.

One might argue that classical liberalism’s technico-rationalism has always been accompanied by its apparent opposite. Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* must, in this sense, be read in tandem with his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, because together they evoke a social form that symmetrically weds self-love to what Smith called “fellow-feeling,” the market to morals, and the rational-economic to the compassionate-beneficent.<sup>58</sup> Karl Marx pointed to this dialectic when he wrote that “the ethics of political economy is *acquisition*, work, thrift, sobriety. . . . The political economy of ethics is the opulence of a good conscience, of virtue.”<sup>59</sup> Liberalism’s form, in sum, has always been ontologically indeterminate to the core. But what is profoundly different about the neoliberal project outlined here is that the compassionate-beneficent can today also be occupied by the Left, that is, by

55. Schmitt, *Römischer Katholizismus*, 36–37.

56. Schmitt, *Römischer Katholizismus*, 41.

57. Bourdieu, *Acts of Resistance*, 94.

58. See Adam Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, ed. Edwin Cannan (1904; rpt. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976); and Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie (Oxford: Clarendon, 1976).

59. Karl Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978), 97.

those political actors who always thought of themselves in opposition to political economy's ethic.

The hegemonic logic in operation in the welfare society is thus, arguably, more insidious than its liberal forebear, or even the fascist project under which Gramsci wrote, because it crisscrosses both right and left political domains. Its architecture is erected out of materials that seemed incommensurable in the past but today exist in intimate, even *unheimliche*, affinity. Of course, fascism flirted with political indeterminacy, too. But these flirtations occurred at a historical moment when communism and socialism, far from defeated forces in European public life, represented two distinct and equally possible political, social, and economic forces in ways that leftist programs today often do not. The ideological promiscuity exhibited by the neoliberal welfare society is thus so hegemonic because it entails two registers that operate simultaneously while appearing as oppositional. These opposites are sutured into a complex of opposites consisting of a market and moral order.

