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The wave of populism and the end of the digital utopia in Trump's America, in the shadow of the Chinese dragon

The Teatro Sociale was packed this afternoon for the encounter with Federico Rampini, columnist and USA correspondent for “la Repubblica”, introduced by the American journalist Jennifer Clark. In Italy few journalists are more capable than Rampini of explaining the USA today, a country that is on the one hand experiencing the consequences and changes caused by Donald Trump's election as President and on the other what can be described as the betrayal of the so-called digital utopia by the bosses of the web.

With his in-depth knowledge of the United States, Federico Rampini wished to recount a journey lasting many years from the industrial heartland of America, the area that voted for Trump, in the area of the Midwest known as the Rust Belt, to the west coast of California, in the midst of the bosses of the web who betrayed the digital utopia. His exploration began a long time ago, with his first journey to America and California in 1979: “For young left-wing Europeans it was a legendary destination, a magical place, a sort of testing ground for everything that we wished to bring to the Old Continent, a multiethnic libertarian society with a high concentration of university research. It was not yet the Silicon Valley of today, but there was already the idea of combining advanced technology with progressive thinking”. However, it was also in 1979, Rampini recalls, that Ronald Reagan began his bid for the White House, starting precisely from California, where he was governor. Thus two different stories developed from the same area: one radical and extremely progressive, in the form of technological utopias, and the other based on reaction and conservative resurgence”. In that period, economists and sociologists were starting to analyse the shift of the American economic centre away from the old states of the Midwest, i.e. the Rust Belt, towards the areas of the so-called Sun Valley and the Pacific coast. This represented a geographical relocation of American capitalism, which moved towards areas that were little unionised and away from the trade union strongholds.

Rampini went back to San Francisco in California in 1999, when there was a completely different picture, during the boom of the new economy, with the NASDAQ reaching its peak before the dot-com bubble burst in 2000. “There was a climate of great euphoria, with people in their twenties having made millions with start-up companies. However, alongside them the libertarian and anti-capitalist current that had created the utopia of the Internet still resisted. They were protesters and rebels, computer and mathematical geniuses who wanted the web to remain an undefined territory with no barriers to knowledge; a current that has since been defeated or that has in part embraced the capitalism it once opposed. This is the case of Steve Jobs, a young dreamer in love with Bob Dylan and Joan Baez, who became a pirate of capitalism; a path that was common for many”.

One of the many points touched on by Rampini regarded the industrial working class of the Midwest, who have often felt betrayed by the left-wing. These are the workers who elected first Reagan in 1980 and then Trump, who has rediscovered a language capable of communicating with a world abandoned by those who should have defended their rights. Ronald Reagan defended them from the Japanese with protectionist measures, and now Donald Trump is doing something similar. “American workers are not racist”, emphasised the journalist from the Repubblica newspaper “but they have understood for some time that immigration is used to swindle them. It should be made clear that in the USA, as in Europe, capitalism uses

immigration to reduce salaries, defeat workers' movements and reduce their negotiating power. A lesson that left-wing do-gooders seem to have forgotten but that workers experience at first hand every day". Finally, Federico Rampini also spoke about the rise of China: "Nobody anticipated it would reach the level of growth achieved today, probably not even its own rulers. Nobody understood to what extent China would be capable of replicating the miracles of Japan, South Korea or Taiwan on a gigantic scale", underlined the journalist. "This has given rise to a genuine economic earthquake, the like of which humanity has never experienced, with half a billion Chinese people who have gone from abject poverty to being a part of the middle class in the space of twenty years. And it is precisely the Chinese dragon that will increasingly have to be contended with in the future".

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