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Parties between continuity and change since 1980s – Italy and beyond

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The articles in this Special Issue all focus on the roots of the spectacular collapse of the Italian party system between 1992 and 1994 that as we have sought to make clear lay in the 1970s and 1980s. The articles illustrate how diverse those roots actually were, and how often they went into opposite directions. The authors have looked at how the main (government) parties involved, most notably the Socialists, Liberals and Communists, assessed their own status and evaluated the growing dissatisfaction of many citizens with them. They have reviewed the critical views of outsider parties and politicians such as those of the maverick DC-politician Mario Segni and those of the Radical Party. And they have considered the cultural reflection of growing civil discontent, most notably on Italian television.

Notwithstanding these differences, however, there are two striking similarities that surface and became ever more strongly pronounced and urgent as the 1980s proceeded. First, it was broadly agreed that the relationship between Italian parties, all parties, and citizens was not working and that the cause of the disease lay with the former. The diagnosis of the observers inside the parties of both opposition and government (and echoed on TV in even more plain terms) was that parties had alienated themselves from the citizens because they were focused almost solely on government rather than with the concerns of ordinary citizens. They had become too powerful and too entangled with the state, which not only led to high levels of corruption but also to high levels of public debt, inefficiency, and bad services. In other words, so ran their often rather self-critical analysis, parties not only governed (rather than answered to needs of civic participation and representation) but they also governed badly. Second, there was a broad agreement that institutional reform was the best cure for this disease. This included reforms inside the parties, such as the efforts of Mario Segni to establish a new current inside the DC and turn the Christian Democrats in a more liberal party, or those of Achille Occhetto to reform the PCI in a social democratic direction, or those of Marco Pannella to provoke the old parties by

adopting new modes of party politics. But the best remedy was widely believed to be reform of Italy's republican institutions to protect citizens against allegedly greedy and power-hungry politicians and give them more influence. Although the parties might disagree on the precise content of proposed changes, they often supported the general direction: a new electoral system, decentralization, strengthening of the executive, possibly direct election of the president, and weakening of the power of the Senate (as well as changes in how it was elected or its composition) were often part of a palette with which politicians of all parties coloured their picture of a healthier political system.

With so much common concern that was voiced by eccentric politicians such as Bettino Craxi and Pannella with a growing sense of urgency, it might seem striking that the 1980s were marked most of all by institutional stasis, typified by the failed Bicameral Commission on constitutional reform (1983–1985). Parties were gripped by what Pietro Scoppola has called the 'paradox of institutional reform', in which parties that stood most to lose from reforms blocked them, making the need for reform (and the erosion of party legitimacy) only more acute (Scoppola 1997, 430). In other words, although inside most parties there was plenty of talk, there was in the end little action on reforms. This is why the postponement of reform in the 1980s worked like a pressure cooker that built up steam before the explosion of the early 1990s, all the talk of reform and the rhetoric against the legitimacy of parties all the while building up expectations that were almost impossible to meet. By the early 1990s, in a now altered European context, the initiatives of some politicians (Segni comes to mind first) served to transform these expectations into new forms of political engagement and to sweep away parties that had postponed reform for so long that they ultimately lost control of the reform process altogether. Indeed, the paradox of institutional reform would not last for ever.

In that way, understanding the histories of parties in the 1980s can help us to explain what happened afterwards, even though the change took a rather different form from what most politicians at the time had expected (and desired). Many observers inside and outside the parties had called in the preceding decade for a reformed and closer bond between citizens and the parties, but the changes that took place between 1992 and 1994 led not so much to a reinvigorated marriage but to divorce. Party membership either dwindled or took novel forms in new parties that always labelled themselves 'movements'. This counted, first, for *Forza Italia*, for a long time the most powerful actor to emerge in the 1990s that promised to be radically different from the traditional mass party. It was initially built on a loose network of 'clubs' in which all citizens could join, had a very light and flexible ideology and was held together mainly by its leader Silvio Berlusconi, who initially symbolized a radical break with the way Italian elites had hitherto shaped their relationships with citizens (Orsina 2013). But it also counted, in a more radical form, for the Five Star Movement (M.5.S.), founded by another

personality who made his career on T.V. in the 1980s, Beppe Grillo, and who promised to do away with things like 'party membership' and 'party offices' and 'party leaders altogether (the fact that that the M.5.S., of course, subsequently has not managed to maintain this promise is a different matter).

Although the party system has radically changed, as in the 1980s criticism of the parties and their relationship with citizens has remained a powerful trait of Italian democracy and is still expressed forcefully by those inside and outside power. Despite all the changes that have taken place, therefore, whether the parties of today have managed to cure what their predecessors saw as the most severe illness of Italian democracy, the relationship between parties and citizens, is still open to question. The 'challenge of renewal' seems to have been only partly met. This also counts for the failure to realize the promise of a so-called 'Second Republic', even though these promises were kept alive so long that people started wondering whether Italy had entered a kind of political transition that seemed endless (and was therefore non-existent, see: Bull 2012). There were many reasons for this sense of delusion, but, from the perspective of this Special Issue, an important one was the failure to enact the kind of institutional reforms that were aired constantly in the 1980s. The track record of Italy's political parties in the 1990s and 2000s on this score has not been exactly impressive. Most of the institutional changes were limited to electoral reform and party finance reform (recently complemented by a reduction of the number of M.P.s) and forced upon politicians from the outside by means of referendums (although the initiative to reform the institutional system, including decentralization and weakening of the Senate, proposed by Matteo Renzi in 2016 was rejected by referendum [Pasquino and Valbruzzi 2017]).

But even if Italian politicians in the 1990s, and after, have not been able to answer the challenge of renewal fully, Italy's political scene has witnessed large-scale changes perhaps, paradoxically, precisely because of this. And this matters also beyond the peninsula. At first, the dramatic collapse of the traditional parties in the 1990s was considered an exclusively Italian affair, perhaps emblematic for the particularly 'problematic nature' of Italian democracy compared with other countries. Paul Ginsborg, among others, argued that they were 'no part of a European development' (Ginsborg 2003, 283). But although some features of Italy's situation were surely unique (the way the Cold War impacted domestic politics, the extent and moralization of political corruption, the impact of television), the changes in the party system were also connected to and perhaps foreshadowed developments elsewhere. For some, most notably Marc Lazar, Italy is a 'laboratory' of changes in Western democracies (Lazar 2013). The articles presented here seem to underlined the importance of studying these Italian developments in a European context as well and they provide several leads on how to do that- the turn to social democracy of, first, the Partito Socialista Italiano (P.S.I.)

and, later, the P.C.I./Democratic Party in the context of the 'Third Way' of social democracy; the efforts to give Italy a presidential system, or at least a two-party system with government alternation that was assumed to be a 'normal' European democratic dynamic, which is why references to France and Britain were often made; the reorganization of parties around the figure of the party leader which seem to precede what Bernard Manin has described as 'audience democracy' (Manin 1997). But it counts most of all for the deeper-lying roots of the alienation between the traditional parties in European democracies and their electorates. Even if not experiencing the kind of shock that Italy did in 1992–1994, all social democratic and Christian democrat parties in Europe have seen a steady erosion of their support which now has proceeded to such a point that many of them face existential questions. The scope of the crisis of party democracy underlines the importance of studying the Italian crisis and its roots so that we can better understand developments in both Italy and Europe at large.

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