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The Italian Party System before the crash: parties and the challenge of renewal in the 1980s

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ABSTRACT

As many historians suggest, the collapse of the Italian party system in the early 1990s was the result of dynamics that had troubled the political system in the previous decade. This Special Issue examines the parties' views on the loss of their capacity for representation and governance in the 1980s. The focus is on how aware the political actors themselves were of the 'crisis' of the political system and the need for reform of some of its aspects/articulations, what strategies of delegitimization of the system they themselves had aimed at, and, possibly, what strategies they put in place or attempted to put in place to get out of the crisis.

RIASSUNTO

Come suggeriscono molti storici, il crollo del sistema partitico italiano all'inizio degli anni Novanta fu il risultato di dinamiche che avevano travagliato il sistema politico nel decennio precedente. Questa Special Issue esamina il punto di vista dei partiti sulla perdita della loro capacità di rappresentanza e di governo negli anni Ottanta. L'attenzione si concentra su quanto gli stessi attori politici fossero consapevoli della "crisi" del sistema politico e della necessità di riformarne alcuni aspetti/articolazioni, su quali strategie di delegittimazione del sistema essi stessi avessero puntato e, eventualmente, su quali strategie avessero messo in atto o tentato di mettere in atto per uscire dalla crisi.

KEYWORDS Italian Republic; democracy; political parties; crisis; delegitimation

PAROLE CHIAVE Repubblica italiana; democrazia; partiti politici; crisi; delegittimazione

In the early 1990s Italy experienced momentous political change.¹ Between 1989 and 1994 a party system that had always seemed one of the most stable in Europe effectively collapsed. The Communist Party (P.C.I.) transformed itself into the 'Democratic Party of the Left', while Christian Democrats, Socialists and their minor allies fragmented and disintegrated in the wake of the mother of all corruption scandals. These events ushered in a decade of political change and a party system transformed forever.

On one hand, the collapse of the Italian party system in 1992–94 has often been seen as a consequence of the collapse of communism, the exposure of corruption and rotten political patronage that was widely mediatized and put on trial the main political parties. On the other hand, it is seen as the result of

a permanent, organic and systemic crisis, reflecting the unresolved issues of the country's entire history. In short, since the late 1980s the demise of the historical justification for Italy's 'special democracy,' namely the external pressure of the international political framework established by the Cold War (Craveri 1995), uncovered a system that had long since been shaken to its foundations and traversed by extraordinary pressures (Gentiloni Silveri 2019).

The interpretation that finds the greatest consensus among historians² is that the collapse of the party system in the early 1990s was the result of dynamics that had troubled the Italian political system in the previous decade. Therefore the roots of the crisis can be traced back to the late 1970s: the assassination of Aldo Moro, the crisis of 'national solidarity' and the early end of the 7th legislature in 1979 can thus be seen not only as the 'exhaustion of all possible evolutionary formulas of the First Republic', but precisely as the beginning of the demise of the Italian party system that had emerged out of the Second World War almost five decades before (Craveri 2004; Colarizi 2021). In other words, if we want to understand the exceptional political renewal of the 1990s, we should study closely the changes in the preceding decade.

In the 'long 1980s,' between the exhausting of national solidarity in 1979 and the first round of 'anti-establishment' referendums in 1991, several problems that had run through the Italian republican history got worse and new arose (among others, Scoppola 1991; Lanaro 1992; Giovagnoli 2004). In particular, the relations between political parties and society, and between political parties and institutions were modified as the former's representative and governing capacities were failing (Lupo 2004). Many historians have identified factors external to the parties as causes of the detachment of 'civil society' from the parties mostly. These include the international changes that took place since the late 1970s that prevented the functioning of the system on the basis of an alternative to Christian Democracy (D.C.), as well as social and cultural transformations: the deep crisis of ideologies that called into question collective identities and parties as protagonists of the Italian political scene; the new forms that engagement in politics were now taking; the emergence of new 'post-materialist' demands from society; the disappearance of the 'general classes'. But other interpretations have highlighted factors that were largely the result of dynamics triggered by the parties themselves such as the processes of occupation of society and the consociative formula;³ the contradiction between the centrist character entrenchment of the *pentapartito* formula and the harsh conflict between government partners; and the inability to overcome the crisis of D.C. centrality.

This Special Issue does not aim to investigate the causes of the gap between politics and society, but instead examines the views of the parties themselves on the loss of their capacity for representation and governance in

the 1980s. The articles that follow analyse especially how aware the political actors themselves were of the 'crisis' of the political system and the need for reform of some of its aspects/articulations, what strategies of delegitimization of the system they themselves had aimed at, and, possibly, what strategies they put in place or attempted to put in place to get out of the crisis. The term *a quo* identified is precisely 1979. Nonetheless, some of the articles start from the preceding decades precisely to show the changes that occurred in the 1980s in the strategy, organization, political culture, even the identity of the parties. Almost all of them highlight an acceleration of the dynamics of the crisis, the processes of delegitimization of the system and the awareness of the system's vicious circle, which occurred from the second half of the 1980s.

This is the case, first of all, with the P.C.I., which from 1979 when it suffered a 4 per cent decline in support the early elections and experienced the end of its long rise. As Martin Bull shows in his article, the P.C.I. faced a multidimensional crisis in the 1980s: a decline in membership and its electorate, a crisis of strategy and a crisis of identity. But the reforms proposed by Achille Occhetto in 1988, then sanctioned by the P.C.I.'s 18th congress in March 1989, did not go so far as to transform the P.C.I. into a social-democratic party, despite the ideological, organizational and strategic changes achieved. Just as Occhetto was trying to cross the ford, the collapse of communist regimes had the effect of changing the very nature of the ford.

In contrast, the Socialist Party (P.S.I.) had already gone through a profound transformation in the second half of the 1970s. Socialists stood at the forefront of attempts to re-invent party organizations and made them fit for the more individualized and mediatised society. As Pepijn Corduwener shows, they interpreted the crisis of the Italian political system both as a crisis of party legitimacy and as a crisis of governability. Their leader, Bettino Craxi, intended to remedy this twofold crisis from the position of government leadership, but, as the author explains, it was the ideological, organizational and representational changes undertaken by the P.S.I. that contributed to its crisis in the early 1990s.

Liberals and Radicals shared an early awareness of the crisis of the political system and very similar diagnoses of the crisis that originated from degenerative phenomena in the parties themselves. These included bureaucratization, consolidation of oligarchies, closure toward society and, in the system as a whole, consociativism, occupation and feudalization of public administration,⁴ monopolization of the channels of political expression in society, as well as the identification of the P.S.I. as the main engine for transforming the system. However, they adopted different strategies for emerging from the crisis. As Gerardo Nicolosi shows, the Liberal Party set out in search of a new lib-lab course and developed reflections on the possible revision of the party-form, persuaded of the need for transforming the latter while still opting for accepting the *status quo* by accommodating

itself in government positions. The Radical Party, analysed by Lucia Bonfreschi, sought to implement a twofold political strategy: the construction of a 'lay pole' and the introduction of electoral reform, changes that would have consequences for the parties themselves and the dynamics of the party system.

Even within the D.C. there were those who identified electoral reform as the change that would force the parties to change. As Paolo Carusi argues, Mario Segni's reformist initiative that was initially aimed at parliamentarians soon acquired an anti-party significance and anti-Craxi-Andreotti-Forlani (C.A.F.) axis positions ended up accentuating the delegitimization of the parties themselves. But Segni also expressed his conviction of the loss of the parties' original function and their inability to reform themselves. The cases of the Radicals, Liberals and Segni, but also of the Socialists, show both the efforts made by the different political forces to initiate the change necessary to cross the ford and also their inability to get to the other side of the river, so that the reform of the institutional structure, that initially they themselves had advocated, acquired the flavour, in the late 1980s, of reform *against* the parties themselves.

In short, several political figures became aware of the political (and moral) delegitimization of parties and the political system and the vicious circle that had been created between delegitimization, impossibility/inability to carry out reforms, shelter behind positions of power, additional delegitimization. The mass media also contributed to this vicious circle: cinema and television programmes played not only the role of mirroring collective mentalities, moods and imagery, but also became a flywheel of the representations and arguments underlying them, reinforcing them in a self-feeding circuit. As Paolo Mattera shows, between the second half of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s 'high' culture and popular cinema, entertainment and news television programs indiscriminately offered standardized and predictable images of politicians of all ideological orientation as thieves, corrupt, incompetent figures that were distant from the real needs of citizens.

Notes

1. The Introduction and Conclusions of this Special Issue, as well as its editing, were jointly conceived and elaborated by Lucia Bonfreschi and Pepijn Corduwener. Specifically, Bonfreschi wrote the Introduction and Corduwener the Conclusions.
2. See for instance the Special Issue 3/2022 of the *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*.
3. The term "consociativism" means a political system where the decision-making mechanism is not based on the majority principle, but in reaching agreement or compromise between the majority and the minority; it often leads to a hidden distribution of political power. Consociativism has been pointed out as one of the factors that have fueled the parties' occupation of society, i.e. the

invasiveness of the parties – even through institutions – vis-à-vis every sphere of civil, social and cultural life.

4. According to Liberals and Radicals, Italian political parties “invaded” public administration by controlling resources, enrolment, careers, etc. and many often they shared this occupation among them; this led to the politicization of public administration and to its functioning along political rationale and political affiliation (‘feudalization’).

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