

**Political Science in Italy: Recurrent Problems and  
Perspectives**

Gianfranco PASQUINO

Università di Bologna

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1. Political analyses are inevitably influenced by current themes, processes, issues. This has always been the case even for the distant founders of the discipline in Italy. The creation of political order was at the center of all speculations and suggestions, historical remarks and practical teachings formulated by Nicolo' Machiavelli for his Prince. The Florentine's analysis was and remains a masterful example of realism and of policy science. Later, Gaetano Mosca, Vilfredo Pareto and Roberto Michels applied their knowledge to what was considered the most important problem of political systems in their transformation into democratic regimes. One way or another, it was the problem of the ruling class (Mosca), of the selection and circulation of elites and their resort to political formulae (Pareto), of the (im)possibility of intra-party democracy even inside the would-be most democratic party of them all, the Socialdemocratic party (Michels), and therefore the very impossibility of democracy in the political system at large. Mosca, Pareto and Michels were as realists as Machiavelli, only perhaps slightly more inclined to believe in the "pessimism" of the intelligence", as Gramsci would have put it. And indeed it was Gramsci who formulated the most comprehensive view of the political development of Italy and who produced teachings and suggestions for his own (collective) Prince: the political party, namely the Communist Party. The last of the realistic and partly pessimistic analyses of the Italian political system was stifled by the combination of political (Fascism) and by cultural (the overwhelming influence of Croce's idealism) factors.

2. Sandwiched between idealism and official communist marxism, itself interpreted in an idealist vein, Italian political science had a difficult resurrection after the fall of Fascism in the new democratic climate. But it did resurrect, thanks to Norberto Bobbio and Giovanni Sartori, showing some of the same characteristics of the founding grandfathers: realism and pessimism. Though utilizing different methods and mixing realism and pessimism in different doses, both Bobbio and Sartori have considerably contributed to the re-establishment of the discipline and to the identification of its major themes. Closely related to the political developments in Italy in the fifties and sixties, those themes can be defined: the nature of the democratic discourse, the problem of the political elites, the role of parties and the party system.

This story has been frequently told. For our purposes here, it might suffice and be useful just to highlight three major points. First, Bobbio and Sartori chose for their analyses the hottest topics of the time, topics which were obviously related to the grand tradition of Italian political science but also promised a clear impact on current political developments. Second, though belonging to two different "political families" -non-marxist socialism, Bobbio; moderate liberalism, Sartori- their method of analysis can be defined as positivism, more precisely positivist realism. It might be worthwhile to stress that positivist realism was not exactly a popular method in a country where cultural hegemony was disputed between Catholicism and marxian Communism (when influenced by Gramsci also indebted to idealism). Third, their

approach and their perspective were, so to speak, systemic, never partial, even when dealing with political elites and parties and party system.

No doubt Bobbio and Sartori identified the most important objects of analysis so much so that they were not only widely read by the lay public, the non-specialists. They were also widely quoted outside the discipline of political science and political philosophy, above all by constitutional lawyers and political historians. Because of the choice of themes and their analytical power, they are still quite well known and often the debate recalls their contributions. Moreover, they have set very high standards for students and practitioners of political science, in terms of scholarship, literary excellence, civic commitment. One does not have to agree with them on all their analyses and conclusions. But one can always learn and always find food for thought, not only a method but also stimuli and ideas. The question, then, becomes: has Italian political science been true and faithful to its post-war masters? If yes, in which way; if not, why and with which shortcomings and, possibly, contributions?

**3.** The criteria to be utilized in order to evaluate the degree of faithfulness to the teaching of the masters must be recalled: the choice of meaningful themes, the method of positivist realism, the systemic perspective. As to the choice of themes, one can say that the Italian political science debate in the sixties and early seventies was indeed centered around the nature, characteristics, and potentialities for change of the Italian party system. This debate is well known and need not be summarized once more (even though distortions still abound in the recent literature). The most important participants were Sartori himself, Giorgio Galli, and the late Paolo Farneti (I should perhaps also mention myself at this point). Leaving aside the scholarly merits of the controversy -whether the Italian party system can be defined as polarized pluralism (Sartori), imperfect two-party system (Galli), centripetal pluralism (Farneti), the underlying political issue caught the attention of scholars and politicians alike. Is a political alternative practicable in the Italian political system, that is will Italian democracy be capable of "absorbing" a government of the left, up to recent times dominated by the Communist party? Or is Italian democracy doomed to function at low levels of performance because the "alternative" is not simply difficult, but a risky one? Through the debate on the nature of the party system, a major debate on the nature, and possible transformation, of Italian democracy was initiated and sustained. For a long period of time, this debate was focused almost exclusively on the parties and their interactions, on intraparty competition, the well-known issue of party factions, on voters' behaviour and change, on the ties between parties and groups (the issue of clientelism). In the early fifties, in a sharp exchange with the Communist party secretary Palmiro Togliatti, Bobbio had launched -and has since sustained and revived- a debate on the relationship between politics and culture. In the mid-seventies, Bobbio himself challenged Marxism for its lack of a "theory of the State" (and of political institutions).

Much less attention was devoted to the interactions of parties and institutions and to institutional constraints on party behaviour, though Sartori himself had edited and contributed to an excellent research on the Italian Parliament. Indeed, in its efforts to disentangle itself from constitutional law, too often have Italian political scientists either totally neglected or seriously underestimated the role of institutions in contemporary politics as well as in Italian politics.

The great amount of attention devoted to political parties correctly reflects the importance of Italian parties in the political system. However, some political scientists (and political sociologists, such as Alessandro Pizzorno) have correctly perceived in the seventies that the balance of power was in the process of changing. Society was becoming more demanding, and the issue of social movements came to the fore -though too often idealized by some Italian political sociologists and underestimated by Italian political scientists. Institutions were caught in the midst of the crisis of governability -and, surprisingly, constitutional lawyers did not have very much to say or to write in an innovative way. The field became then open for Italian political scientists to analyze the roots of their democracy and once again design possible futures.

4. At this point, the lesson of positivist realism allowed and to a large extent promoted some few good studies of the roots of Italian democracy, especially in terms of the nature, selection, promotion of political elites (which was Paolo Farneti's project). It did not foster and definitely did not put a premium on the formulation of proposals for change. Indeed, the policy side of Italian political science, especially with respect to modifications of the Constitution and the State institutions, was effectively discouraged. This was also due to a misplaced feeling of competition with the field of public and constitutional law. As if the strength of a discipline could be measured in terms of its ability to deal with exclusive subjects and not of dealing more convincingly with similar subjects or the same ones! On the other hand, it could not be denied that some constitutional lawyers were indeed effective practitioners of the method of positivist realism (in some cases, even excessively so...).

As to the nature of the perspective, those political scientists who tackled the issue of democracy, alternation of governing coalitions, circulation of political elites, produced systemic analyses. However, in too many cases, as unfortunately in too much contemporary political science elsewhere, micro-analyses took the upper hand. Subsystemic studies appeared, often without enough solid research behind them and not theoretically well informed. Minor detailed pieces of research proliferated, abandoning the tradition and betraying the examples set by the masters.

As to political science and politics in Italy, the eighties are marked by major developments. The discipline of political science has reached its maturity both in terms of the rapid expansion of its practitioners, the fashion of labeling even political

commentators "politologi", the production of major studies. The dynamics of the political system and the political debate offer an important field to be analyzed, interpreted, perhaps even to be influenced. However, the interaction between Italian political science and its politics has become difficult, controversial, unsatisfactory.

**5.** The growth and the maturity of the discipline are testified and documented by three books. The publication of a "Manuale di scienza della politica" (1986), already translated into Spanish, entirely written by Italian scholars, all at one point or another, disciples of Bobbio and Sartori, blending together the best of the Italian-European and US scholarship. The publication of a collective volume on "L'analisi della politica. Tradizioni di ricerca, modelli, teorie" (1989) which provides a thorough introduction to, deep discussion of, and stimulating interpretation of all major approaches, perspectives, paradigms used in contemporary political science (the only gap is represented by the lack of the institutional approach). All chapters but one have been written explicitly for this reader by Italian contributors. Finally, a sound and exhaustive assessment of the discipline, both in quantitative and qualitative terms, is provided by "Scienza Politica" (1989). The chapters of this book offer a topic-by-topic presentation of what Italian political scientists have written so far, where the discipline comes from, where is presumably going to.

Where is in fact Italian political science going to? And how much is it capable of, and willing to influence the political discourse and political choices in the Italian political system? Political science is not just a science like the others. After all, it deals with politics, that noble art which shapes our present and future of individuals living in organized collectivities. While most Italian practitioners of political science have, more or less consciously, withdrawn from the idea of being capable to exercise some influence on political choices, a hidden debate is now taking place both on the possibility and the desirability to rely on political science, to utilize political science in order to suggest, indicate, shape political choices. Granted that, not all political science can, nor should become a policy science, how much space does it exist and can be exploited for political science as an applied science? And how much knowledge do Italian political scientists have which can reasonably be applied to illuminate the dynamics of the system and to identify the available alternatives and to evaluate their costs and consequences?

These questions have become important for two main reasons. On the one hand, the quantitative growth of the discipline is bound to raise the issue of its tasks, accomplishments, usefulness. And this issue cannot be skirted and the corresponding answers cannot be postponed for a long period of time without serious negative consequences. The second reason is that the Italian political system is undergoing a phase of transformation. It has been a protracted, difficult, painful, and unguided transformation so far. But exactly because of all the difficulties, there is a feeling that perhaps some contributions might, and perhaps should come from

political scientists. This is particularly true, even though not always evident, when analyzing the changes which are taking place in the system and the solutions which are being put forward in the ongoing political, and academic, debate.

**6.** Major changes have taken place in the Italian political system. They have not yet been translated into those most visible and frequently scrutinized phenomena represented by changes in the composition of the governing coalitions. Here, for our purposes, it will suffice to summarize some of them and to highlight their actual and future implications. It will then be necessary to evaluate whether Italian political science is an active and influential participant in the debate, or not, and why not.

A political system and a democratic regime founded on the strength and resilience, on the representative capabilities and governing role of political parties, such as the Italian one, is now facing squarely the crisis of those same parties which have built Italian democracy and made it work (admittedly with several imperfections). The crisis of Italian parties is therefore closely interwoven with the so-called crisis of governability. On the one hand, the Christian Democrats do not enjoy any longer a central position in the party alignment or in the process of coalition-building. On the other, no other party has succeeded in replacing them, notwithstanding the consistent and repeated attempts by the Socialist party. On the one hand, the political and party systems need some sort of circulation of elites, perhaps of alternation of governing coalitions; on the other, the only viable alternative, the Communist Party, is undergoing a process of transformation growing out of the lethal crisis of international communism, its own electoral weakness, its perceived inability to shape an alternative coalition, to get the votes for it, to make it work at the national level in a reliable way. In sum, Italian parties decline and, in all likelihood, the party system has initiated a phase of realignment. But few, if any, political scientists are today studying these important processes. Contrary to what happened in the sixties, no major debate has taken place on these processes and no significant interpretation of them has been advanced so far.

On the contrary, there has been the tendency, less pronounced among political scientists, to believe and make believe that what political parties cannot do any longer will automatically be done by Italian civil society (to use a terminology dear, among others, to Antonio Gramsci, though, of course, Gramsci would be very suspicious of the autonomous capabilities of Italian civil society in the absence of a well organized political party). Italian society has, of course, changed itself. In some areas, it is mature, Western, European. In other areas, though, it is weak, Southern, Latinamerican (as the current jargon would define it). It has grown together with its own parties and their politics. It might have outgrown them all. Nevertheless, it remains doubtful whether it will be able to govern itself without party politics. It may be susceptible and exposed to a process of fragmentation and corporatization, already under way in some areas and in some sectors.

Where parties decline and society is not strong and articulate enough to replace them, institutions might fill the vacuum. The role of representative and governing institutions has been too long neglected by Italian political scientists to expect from them, with very few exceptions, a reasonable, original, usable perspective. However, the debate on the reform of the institutions has raged now for almost fifteen years. It has filled the pages of dailies, weeklies, academic journals; it has produced very many books, most of them, admittedly, of poor quality. It has found relatively little attention among professional political scientists.

Surprise and disappointment are mixed together. As a matter of fact, the debate on the reform of the Italian form of government is not simply the most important political debate since the Constituent Assembly (June 1946 - December 1947). It is bound to become and remain the most influential political debate in terms of its consequences for every single institution, for the whole of the Italian Constitution, for future party alignments, for the creation of governing coalitions. In no other case is the relationship between institutions and politics so close, so significant, so clear as in the debate on the so-called Grand Reform. No doubt, even the destiny of individual political parties and of party Coalitions is strictly tied to the solution of institutional issues.

In the light of their contributions to the analysis of individual parties and of the dynamics of the Italian party system, one would have expected more from Italian political scientists. The problem is that Bobbio has openly and repeatedly declared that he believes in the persistent validity of the Italian Constitution that it is still waiting to be fully implemented. Paradoxically, the austere advocate and guardian of the rules of the game has often chastised parties and party leaders for their behaviour without feeling the need to call for sanctions founded on stricter and more precise rules. On his part, from New York, Sartori has usually refrained from tackling the issue of institutional and constitutional reforms. His own theme has been that of the reform of the electoral system in the direction of reducing its proportionality and of devising mechanisms which oblige parties to create and sustain governing coalitions. What Sartori labeled political engineering has not attracted followers among Italian political scientists (to the exceptions, in differing degrees of commitment, conviction, and production of Fisichella, Pasquino, and Urbani).

7. Parties decline, institutions are in dire need of revisions: how is then Italian democracy transforming itself? How much space for political and technical influence is open and can be effectively exploited? Unfortunately, most Italian political scientists have evaded the issue. Some of them have even come to the (decidedly unwarranted) conclusion that the main problem of Italian democracy is the so-called "autoriforma dei partiti" (the self-reform of parties). It is neither, therefore, the reform of the (obsolete) parliamentary form of government in the weak Italian variant, nor the

lack of rotation in the government of really competing and alternative coalitions.

There is a tendency, after many sharp and in some cases culture bound criticisms of the Italian political system, to re-evaluate the quality and the performance of Italian democracy, to upgrade them, particularly among foreign well-informed and knowledgeable scholars (witness LaPalombara, but also in a slightly different vein Tarrow). This tendency has already gone too far, but Italian political scientists have proved unable to counteract it. In the absence of detailed monographs and of comprehensive studies, it will indeed be difficult for Italian political scientists convincingly to explain that the performance of Italian democracy has been consistently under par, that the quality of Italian democracy remains relatively good but is seriously, impaired by the lack of alternation, that the Italian political system is "undergoverned" (both in the meaning of "sottogoverno" and in the meaning of the inability of the governing class successfully to mobilize all the resources and to stimulate all the energies already available in the system).

Thus, on the verge of significant changes, on the threshold of a major turning point, Italian democracy and Italian political actors seem to find little knowledge in the field of political science that is truly applicable, to obtain little help from political scientists themselves, not enough policy science attention and interest.

Too bad. This is definitely not the lesson of the distant founders of the discipline from Machiavelli to Mosca, Pareto, Michels, and Gramsci. It is not either the teaching which can be easily gleaned from the many books and articles as well as from the civic behaviour of the recent re-founders of Italian political science: Bobbio and Sartori. The paradox is that Italian political science has grown, become better organized, more present in the university system, and less inclined or probably less capable of playing an active role in the political discourse of its country. It is my opinion that the divorce of science from politics deprives both of reciprocal stimuli and knowledge. (the theorization of that divorce is a recipe for an unhealthy isolation. It may loom negatively on the future of Italian democracy as well as, and even more so, on the future of Italian political science. Fortunately, and hopefully, it is not too late to reverse this trend.

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