

## Book Review

**James L. Newell** *Parties and Democracy in Italy* Ashgate, 236 pp., £56.00/£22.00

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Between 1992 and 1994 Italian politics was plagued by Tangentopoli or 'Bribesville' scandals. In addition, murders of anti-mafia judges in 1993 shook public trust in the Italian state and had severe repercussions for the concomitant presidential elections. As a consequence of these developments, two subsequent national legislative elections – that of 1994 and 1996 – produced seismic changes in the Italian party landscape (changes further complicated by the reform of electoral laws, enacted by politicians wishing to avoid impending referenda).

Yet, the turnover of political personnel and elites proved to be rather mild by any measurable standard<sup>1</sup>. Notwithstanding transformation of names and formal structures, old political practices and opportunistic alliances have continued unabated<sup>2</sup>. Without falling into a Gattopardesque explanation trap, it could be said that since then not much has changed under the Italian sun.

The book under examination attempts to analyse what Newell considers to be an 'Italian Revolution' by means of a clear pedagogical presentation of the unfolding of the Italian political crisis (p. 10); its causes and consequences being dissected in a chronological manner (p.1). It does not intend to provide original insights, but rather a reconstruction of the broader picture from a 1998 standpoint. To achieve this, the book presents a comprehensive overview of the evolution of Italian politics in the 1990s, focusing on political parties, party membership, and electoral behaviour (p. 3). Throughout the whole book, the argument unfolds according to the same tripartite structure. Chapters 3-5 are dedicated to the presentation of specific causes of the 'Italian Revolution' and Chapters 6-8 – to its consequences. The argument is introduced in Chapter 2 and summarized in Chapter 9.

The basic assumption of the study emerges clearly from the start. According to the author, the 'Italian Revolution' is better understood by looking exclusively at the political sphere. This assumption is coherently developed throughout the book and provides the basis for a reconstructed narrative of a very chaotic political development. It does not leave, however, any space for consideration of societal causes and consequences of the Italian political transformation. This problem is brushed aside by the referring to the 'unfinished' character of Italian dynamics.. In other words, the exclusively political focus and medium-term perspective (adjusted to the period 1989-1998) preclude from the start any possibility of integrating broader and longer-term aspects into this assessment.

The exclusively political focus explains the rarity of references to factors beyond the purely domestic sphere of Italian politics. The only obvious exception is the reference to the end of the Cold War: an event which significantly affected the dynamics of the Italian political system. It was at the origin of the new direction taken by the Partito Comunista Italiano (PCI – Italian Communist Party), which changed its name to that of the Partito Democratico della Sinistra (PDS – Democratic Party of the Left) at the beginning of the 1990s<sup>3</sup>. Apart from the reference to this particular structural factor, other background elements are not clearly investigated.

Such a choice is particularly problematic, because it attaches great importance to a single background factor, at the expenses of other possible causes of the 'Italian Revolution'. In other

writings concerning the same subject, a variety of structural elements were indicated as important explanatory variables of the crisis<sup>4</sup>. Amongst these other factors, it is possible to refer to the connections of organised crime with the Italian State<sup>5</sup>, systemic role of clientelism in Italian political economy<sup>6</sup>, or relevance of the European integration process as an external constraint for domestic politics in Italy<sup>7</sup>.

The medium-term perspective of the book also has specific repercussions for the assessment of the consequences of the 'Italian Revolution', especially taking into account the tripartite nature of the chosen analytical focus: policy, politics, and polity. Concerning policy, the evaluation of the policy-making transformation during the Prodi government (1996-98) is based on the contents of the weekly *Espresso* which, despite the caution of the author, can be suspected of favouring the first leftist governing coalition in the history of the Italian Republic (p. 168).

Concerning politics, another weakness of the medium-term perspective becomes obvious. The book does not consider the impact of personalities and leadership on the multi-faceted evolution of Italian politics of those years (illustrated by the helpful chart on p.32).

As far as the overall characteristics of the polity are considered, the evaluation of Italian political transformation is made by using an idealized Westminster-style political model. Unfortunately, it is used simultaneously both as an analytical template and a normative framework, which points to the problems of employing Anglo-Saxon categorization in the study of Italian transformation<sup>8</sup>.

On the whole, the reviewer warmly recommends the book, especially taking into account the focused and specific contents of the book. The theoretical core of the book, however, would be better understood by referring to two wider debates in the Anglo-Saxon social sciences: the controversy over "agency" and "structure" and the debate between "understanding" and "explaining" approaches. The book would have benefited from a more explicit reference to the related literature and clarification on how the author defines key terms, such as "explaining", "understanding", "agency", and "structural factors" as well as his overall position on these debates.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Beppe Severgnini, "A (slightly) new Italian Establishment" *The Economist* July 10<sup>th</sup> 1997.

<sup>2</sup> See Bruno Mascitelli, "The Italian Second Republic...Come prima, piu' di prima?" paper for the Conference *The Second Italian Republic Ten Years On: Prospect and Retrospect*.

<sup>3</sup> Piero Ignazi, *Dal PCI al PDS* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1992).

Martin Bull, "The Great Failure? The PDS in Italy's Transition" in Stephen Gundle, Simon Parker (eds.), *The New Italian Republic*, (London: Routledge, 1996) pp. 159-172.<sup>4</sup> See Perry Anderson, "Land Without Prejudice" *London Review of Books* 24:6 (2002).

<sup>5</sup> Paul Ginsborg, "Explaining Italy's Crisis" in Stephen Gundle, Simon Parker (eds.), *The New Italian Republic*, (London: Routledge, 1996) pp. 19-39.

<sup>6</sup> Stefano Guzzini, "The Long Night of the First Republic: Years of Clientelistic Implosion in Italy", *Review of International Political Economy* 2:1 (1995) pp. 27-61.

<sup>7</sup> Lucio Caracciolo, *Terra Incognita* (Bari: LaTerza, 2001).

<sup>8</sup> See for an interesting analysis of these problems James Newell, "Interpretive approaches and the study of Italian politics", *Modern Italy* 9:2 (2004) pp. 247-261.

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Perhaps because of the generally consistent and orderly course of their own parties, British political scientists are often fascinated by the eccentric features of the Italian political system and the dynamism of the shift from a multi party system towards a more bipolar one. To the works of Hine (1993), Furlong (1994), Gilbert (1995) and Ginsborg (1996) on the changes in Italian politics, James Newell adds his book, 'Parties and Democracy in Italy'. Taking its strength from agency-actor approaches, and drawing extensively on English and Italian secondary sources and articles, the book retraces the transformation of the parties since the end of the Cold War, paying special attention to their causes and consequences. It deals with parties from the late 1980s to the 1996 elections (section two), 'partitocrazia', corruption and 'Tangentopoli' investigations (section three), electoral changes and the emergence of the Northern League (section four), policy-making via referendum, the 1993 electoral law and its immediate consequences on the political system, and the appearance of Forza Italia (section five), the extent of substantial changes produced by the new party system (section six), the new system's impact on institutions (section seven), as well as on policies (section eight). The book's main argument upholds the notion that a revolution has taken place in Italian party politics though it doesn't quite add up to a qualitative break with the past (p. 185). In tracking such complexities, the author has undertaken a difficult task that results in a useful and informative text with an extensive bibliography, though, being published in 2000, in some areas it has obviously been overtaken by events.

Five points support or counter Newell's analysis, and the structure of his work. First, domestic politics do not take place and evolve in an aseptic and self-contained environment but have links with the international context. The author describes well (pp. 15, 20, 25, 83) the extent to which Italian party politics were fundamentally shaped by the Cold War (section two), but from a methodological and analytical point of view he has not thoroughly developed the basic concept of the external factors that affected Italy's domestic factors. Had he done so, he would have then built a stronger argument on the 'entanglement of domestic and international politics' (Hill and Andreatta, 2001) that, in fact, explains many of the Italian attitudes to policy-making of the post-war period.

Second, one of the early visible consequences of the post-1989 politics was the creation of the 1996 coalition government under Prodi, which included, for the first time since 1947, the participation of all parties of the left. Another evident mark was the occupation of the prime ministerial chair by the National Secretary of the PdS (October 1998), the former Communist party (PCI), Massimo d'Alema. For Italian voters, Republican politics in the 1946-96 period meant being governed by a cabinet that had no respect for the preferences they expressed at the elections: a clear sign of deficient representative democracy. Newell does not neglect the general point (i.e. *conventio ad excludendum* of the PCI from the government) (section two) (pp. 17, 39, 47), though he underestimates the extent to which the Christian Democrats exploited the Cold War to their maximum benefit, not least in accepting such extensive economic support from the US (i.e. the CIA) (The Washington Post, 7 January 1976). Playing down US interference in Italian politics and policy-making<sup>2</sup>, with all the relative consequences for the areas of foreign policy, domestic politics and political parties' behaviour makes Italy's course so much less intelligible.

Third, as Fabbrini has suggested (1998), the Italian political system in the 1990s was progressively penetrated by EU politics and policies. Though more functional adaptation than institutional change ensued, Newell has given little consideration explicitly to the impact of European integration. His work runs counter to the increasing attention being paid by other political scientists, engaged in scrutinising the Europeanisation of member states' domestic politics (Radaelli 2004, Fabbrini 2003, Cowles et al. 2001) and of political parties (Ladrech 2002).

Fourth, partially because of the changes (pp. 119, 122, 127) in party politics since 1994, political stability has increased (p. 181). References such as those of 1963 (Almond and Verba) (p. 181), -- emphasising that changes have not affected 'those classic features of Italian culture of "relatively unrelieved political alienation and of social isolation and distrust"' but have 'eliminate[d] the availability of "destabilising mass movements" as potential outlets for citizen frustrations' -- now look outdated. Moreover, more recent events and manifestations such as the G8 summit in Genoa (2001) and the Girotondi<sup>3</sup> expressed the proliferation of mass movements (2002), which engaged the political parties in the effort (Ginsborg, 2004)<sup>4</sup> to re-conduct them

within traditional party politics.

Fifth, the assertion that significant changes in the social characteristics of parliamentarians have been apparent since 1994 (p. 179) (and were reflected into the quality of legislation) looks scarcely convincing in the light e.g. of the appointment in 2001 of a technical expert (a graduate in mechanical engineering) from the ranks of the Northern League to deal with the complex field of justice, and lead the relevant Ministry (Roberto Castelli).

Patronage in legislation (Financial Times)<sup>5</sup> does not entail a new level of democratic values in the changed political system. The 'decline in particularism and patronage in legislation' (p. 179) appears more like wishful thinking if one looks at the nature of ratified bills e.g. the falso in bilancio (false balance, DLgs 61/2002), and attempts to counter the approval of the European Arrest Warrant (2001). Newell's conclusion that the transformations of the parties brought along 'very real improvements in the quality of Italian democracy' (p. 185) lacks persuasion. One who forged Italy's post-war democracy, Norberto Bobbio, 'prompted his passionate defence of the constitutional "rules of the game" against those who denied their relevance and would overturn them for reasons of pragmatic convenience' (Bellamy 2003).<sup>6</sup> If the Second Republic has still to come about (p. 185), it must above all enhance the quality of its democracy: Newell could have made this clear. Providing a guide to the significance of the change of party politics affecting the quality of Italian democracy as a whole, as the book's back cover claims, is a premature and ambitious task.

Looked at from a more general viewpoint however, the book is very appealing. Embracing several areas worthy of note, it offers a number of interesting details not only to students of contemporary European politics, Italian politics, and democratic politics but also to a more general public: Newell's book is therefore very welcome.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The 1946 De Gasperi's government comprised the forces of the left.

<sup>2</sup> US Secretary of State Kissinger was concerned that Communist participation in an Italian government could have a domino effect on France and West Germany with serious consequences for the Northern Atlantic alliance.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.igirotondi.it/storia.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Ginsborg's speech at the party meeting in Rome (La convention dei girotondi), Teatro Vittoria, 14, 15 February 2004.

<sup>5</sup> 10 December 2004; 13 December 2004.

<sup>6</sup> The Guardian, 13 January 2004.

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Changes in Italian party system since 1989 bear no comparison with any occurrence in post-war history of other western democracies. In the lapse of few years, the parties that dominated the parliament since 1945 have either dissolved or changed their name and transformed profoundly. New elites entered the political arena, with serious consequences on politics and institutions.

James Newell focuses on this revolution, with a book that fulfils its promises. It does not aim to challenge "existing interpretations" on the transformation occurred in Italian party politics, but instead "to enhance understanding of the changes," that is, to provide "fully elaborated descriptions of the underlying mechanisms and causal links tying together the various factors brought together in explanatory sequences."

The book begins with a chapter describing all the major events in chronological order, giving to non-experts in Italian history much needed background. The rest of the book is divided

in two parts along thematic lines. The first part, including chapters from 3 to 5, explores the main determinants of change. It is perhaps the most elaborate section of the book, where a veritable load of facts is described and interpreted. Chapters from 6 to 8 are focused on the consequences this revolution brought about. As underlined by Newell, it is not possible to assess them exhaustively, as the party system has not stabilised yet.

Building on an impressive amount of Italian and English literature, Newell identifies three main factors as accountable for the transformation of the party system. (1) The sudden occurrence of judicial investigations unveiling and prosecuting the structure of political corruption. (2) The change in electoral behaviours, and the rise of the Northern League, a regionalist party that built its fortunes on a populist critique of the traditional political class. (3) A Referendum movement aimed at changing electoral rules from proportional representation to plurality. The movement eventually succeeded, and in 1993 a new majority electoral law was approved.

The diffusion of corruption in Italy was grounded on clientelism. This was fuelled by two concurring factors. First, in the southern regions the State has been historically weak, and resources were mainly allocated through personal links. Second, the political system never knew alternation in power as the main opposition party, the PCI – Italian Communist Party, was excluded a priori due to its ideological stances. In the absence of alternative policy platforms, the clientelistic distribution of resources remained unchallenged. Additionally, the absence of alternation in power reduced the democratic scrutiny of governmental practices.

In 1992, a number of major investigations hit this system. These were backed by an overwhelming majority of the public opinion, and the rise of new parties. The judges became then main actors driving the change in the party system. Investigations quickly invested all major governmental parties including their top leaders and officials.

Drawing from previous literature, Newell links the timing of these investigations with changes in electoral behaviour, as shown by the rise of the Northern League. This populist party proved able to capitalise on the discontent of the richest and most developed part of the country. The southern part of the country was accused of inefficiently consuming resources produced in the north, and traditional parties were held responsible for the consequent spread of corruption.

The new electoral rules, and particularly the Referendum movement that promoted them is identified by Newell as the third agent accountable for the change in the party system. The Referendum movement believed that the proportional system of representation favoured clientelistic practices. A plurality system would have instead reinforced accountability and trust, and delivered stronger and more stable governments.

Between 1994 and 1996, the new rules determined the polarisation of Italian party system. The centre-right block, including the Northern League, grouped new parties around the personality and assets of Berlusconi. Berlusconi was a media tycoon that owed its fortunes to its links with the traditional governmental parties. After the latter were destroyed by corruption scandals, in 1994 he grouped the conservative forces and captured an overall majority in parliament. After the electoral defeat, a centre-left block emerged around the PDS - Democratic Party of the Left – that had took the place of the PCI as mainstream left party. In 1996, the centre-left defeated a fragmented centre-right coalition.

Is the overall balance of the party system revolution positive? Newell seems to share a diffuse sense of disappointment and disillusion, as strong elements of continuity persist besides the changes. Additionally, the system cannot be considered stabilized yet. If the First Republic is dead, the contours of the Second Republic are still to be clearly defined. Under the new system, stability is greater than it was in the past, but it is far from reaching satisfactory levels. With regards to the institutional setting, changes in rules and procedures remained lame. Reforms of the Constitution are deemed necessary but shared consensus proved impossible to reach. Trust in the political system seems decreasing rather than increasing.

The main virtue of this book is perhaps also its main limit. The impressive amount of literature it is written upon, including data on Italian elections, society and media, makes it valuable for any

scholar of Italian politics. Moreover, the quantity of facts and background information makes it accessible also to undergraduate students. However, the lack of a thoroughly comparative approach limits the possibility for more wide-ranging conclusions. Decreasing trust on party politicians is a feature that Italy probably shares with other countries, in fact, Italian turnout is comparatively very high. Corruption and scandals are not an Italian prerogative either, although only in Italy they had such impressive consequences. It is surely impossible to find an overall counterfactual to the revolution of Italian party system. However, terrain of comparison in single areas surely exists.

Finally, the precision of the description offered by Newell is able to raise interesting questions. Among others, it remains unclear why a revolution that occurred on the wave of corruption scandals, supported by new parties, and backed by a popular movement, produced as first Prime Minister in the 'new era' one of the main beneficiaries of the old system, i.e. Berlusconi. What perhaps needs to be understood better is the role played by traditional clusters of actors behind the scenes of an apparently impressive change.