

Italy: The Rise and Decline of a System of Government

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Italy has always received special attention in the studies of comparative government. It had a democracy that seemed weak in that it was continuously shaken by the confrontation between governmental parties and the strongest communist party of the West. Yet Italy also seemed to overcome its difficulties, solve its conflicts and ultimately enjoy the highest level of stability in Europe. My predecessor as Prime Minister, Giulio Andreotti, was already in government in 1946. Not even Andrej Gromiko lasted for so long in the old days of the Soviet Union.

More recently, a sudden and sharp change has occurred and Italy has become the most uncertain and unpredictable democracy of Europe. Its traditional ruling elite has been erased, leaving new and largely unknown rulers on whom no one can safely bet. Is it the outcome of unexpected and unforeseeable events? Is it the final outburst of a longstanding and unremedied malaise that was spreading into the system under the cover of stability?

Of course there is no explosion without triggers. But no explosion would have been so devastating and so effective in leading to radical change, without deep historical underpinnings. If we review them, we realize that Italy is an excellent example of the theory of involution, expounded by Mancur Olson: a vital system that becomes progressively rigid, incapable of correcting its increasing entropies, and unable to keep up with the need of change, is finally destroyed by the impact on its corrupted tissues of newly emerging counter-forces.

Let us go back to the sunrise of the Republic when the Constitution was written by its real founding fathers, the antifascist parties, which, in the stateless Italy of the last years of the World War II, had taken care of the problems of the Italians and had won their convinced support. The Constitution was expected to embody the principles (among others) necessary to eliminate those loopholes of the liberal regime that had allowed fascism to take over in the 1920s. The problem was exactly the same that another Constitutional Assembly, the German one, was

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facing exactly at the same time. Why in the end were the two Constitutions so different from each other?

The German Grundgesetz embodies an entire set of new devices aimed at preventing political fragmentation, forbidding extreme parties, and, above all, ensuring government stability. The Grundgesetz provides for an electoral system that denies representation to parties scoring under five percent. It empowers the Constitutional Court to outlaw parties deemed to be—for their activities but also for their values—against the basic principles of the new Constitution. It provides for a constructive vote of confidence to prevent the joining of the opposite wings against the Cabinet. And it gives the President of the Republic the power to keep a minority Cabinet in office when stability seems to him more important than a temporary lack of confidence.

The Italian Assembly considered each of these devices, and proposals similar to the final decisions taken in Germany were made. One knows the constructive vote of confidence as a German invention, but it had been initially proposed in Italy by Egidio Tosato, a professor of constitutional law and a member of the Assembly with remarkable foresight. However, despite Tosato and others who shared his views, none of these proposals was accepted. Why? Because in Germany the system of government had to find the strength it needed in its own branches and in the powers they were given. In Italy the source of that strength was to be found in our powerful and highly legitimized political parties. They were perfectly aware of this and the German-like proposals were rejected upon the motivation that the cohesion of Parliament and the stability of the Cabinet did not need “artificial” guarantees. They necessarily depended on the enduring common will of the parties freely joining in the majority. Strong parties and weak institutions: this was the background upon which the future Republic should find its balance.

An effective and healthy balance was found in the first years, when the dominant and crucial issue was whether the democratic system would receive the necessary support by a national community that was approaching democracy with widespread second thoughts. Not only the communist party and the revolutionary expectations it had raised during the Resistance were a matter of concern. Alcide De Gasperi, too, had his harsh difficulties with many of his followers in the upper and middle classes, whose Catholic allegiance meant allegiance to the “Sillabo,” a nineteenth century papal doctrine not yet abandoned, that was not against communism, but against liberalism.

Two heavy wings of the Italian electorate were coming from very far away and from opposite extremes. The challenge facing Italy was

to bridge the political cleavage that divided the extremes. Let us assume that we had adopted a Constitution, similar to the German one, that would have allowed the Constitutional Court to outlaw the extremist oppositions and given the majority the power to run the country unconditionally. Would the outcome have been the German stability or the Greek civil war?

I do not have the answer to this intriguing question. What I do know is that the system it became forced the Cabinet to look for a political consensus that was frequently broader than the majority. The majority and the opposition learned how to coexist with each other through parliamentary procedures that made both groups essential for the ordinary activity of Parliament.

It was an extraordinary lesson in democracy, a demonstration of the substantive potential of democratic procedures. A century ago, Edward Bernstein wrote that his fellow socialists made a tragic mistake in fighting against liberal procedures that were not in the form of capitalist oppression but were an unparalleled framework for the appropriate, balanced solution of any conflict. The Italian case supports the "heresy" of Bernstein. Through liberal, democratic procedures, democratic values were learned, finding their roots in an initially hostile environment. Of course, while the mission of De Gasperi, as far as his conservative Catholic side was concerned, appeared convincingly successful after some time, doubts were repeatedly cast on the communists' real conversion.

Was democracy accepted by them as an unavoidable route to subversion (when and if it became possible) or did it become a final and accepted stage of political evolution? The answer will always be disputable. It is a fact that the Italian Communist party continuously evolved to the point of rejecting the party name and part of the old culture. Many of its followers became ordinary members of their communities, sharing the values, goals and aspirations of all the others. The only subversive action coming for the left in the entire cycle of our Republican life (the Red Brigades) was fiercely opposed by the Communist Party. One might be correct in reading ambiguous motivations underlying some of these events. But these are the facts nonetheless.

To this initial but essential purpose, the system worked successfully. It became, however, a peculiar system, quite distinct from the Westminster model and much closer to a "consociative democracy," the term that Arend Lijphart uses to refer to societies with deep ethnic or religious differences.

Due to the proportional system of election and to the consequent fragmentation, the majority itself was built up with broad coalitions of four or five parties. Some of them were minor parties and only the Christian Democrats were above 30 percent in representation. The coalitions were necessarily (and therefore easily) formed to stand against the communists, but not easy to convene upon common solutions of concrete issues. Decision-making processes became lengthy and cumbersome within the ranks of the majority coalition even before facing the opposition. Preliminary proposals by the Cabinet stagnated pending meetings and negotiations with the experts of the parties for their approval, which might take weeks before coming. This approval was a prerequisite to the proposal going to the Council of Ministers and then being submitted to Parliament. At that point negotiations began all over again with the Communist opposition (which renewed differences among the majority parties), upon the background of two basic and related conventions. First, there was a "conventio ad excludendum," according to which the communists were excluded from ministerial positions. Second, there was a compensatory "conventio ad includendum," that implied their involvement in the decision-making process in Parliament.

Of course there were various degrees of involvement. The communists could arrive at a final and formal approval, they could abstain, or they could vote "no" but state their opposition in such a way as not to make the approval impossible. What is important is that all of these outcomes were negotiated, sometimes openly, more often covertly. Consider also that negotiation with the communists was a practical necessity in many cases, independent of the convention that required it. Majority members were frequently absent, busy with their districts' problems, while the communists, whose election was guaranteed by the party machine, were always present. Without them you could not even reach the needed "quorum."

What kind of decisions could come out of these tortuous procedures? It was difficult to expect neat policies and clear cut solutions. The foreseeable outcomes were accumulations of conflicting goals, patchworks that smoothed dissents raised by benefits conferred to one group, and by compensating the potential losers with something else which had the effect of increasing confusion of policies and losses for the public budget.

The seemingly eternal dominance of the majority and its increasingly unhealthy relation to the opposition brought about a third negative consequence: the abuse of the privileged access that political parties had to public channels. Political parties considered themselves as the

stockholders of any public entity with the ability to designate public appointees as a matter of right, no matter the appointment. This was true not only of ministers and undersecretaries, but of top officials of public departments and heads and board members of public banks and public companies at the national and the local level. As long as the opposition had its share, a substantial complicity covered this far reaching spoils system.

Public resentment grew out of this morass. Party affiliation was not accepted any longer as the main requisite to hold public positions. Yet largely unknown was the main abuse: corruption.

The explosives were being piled up under the system. Those who realized it initiated a campaign for reform. Strong parties and weak institutions had been a wonderful formula to overcome the difficulties of the first years and to bridge the initial, wide cleavage. Now the time was ripe for change and change meant a new and less proportional electoral system, stronger institutions empowered to pursue their own policies, and political parties coming down from the pedestals of government and restoring their only role as representatives of popular demands.

Some corrections were introduced, mostly in parliamentary procedures, to give the Cabinet higher chances to have its proposals passed without unnecessarily lengthy negotiations. But the crucial problems remained unsolved. Each of the parties had its own solution (the most convenient to each of them) and no willingness to reach a compromise. Agonizingly, mutual vetoes triumphed. The need for reform entered the popular mode of referenda. Referenda were called to change the electoral system and the overwhelming "yes" vote in 1991 was interpreted, and actually was, the first sign of open and widespread hostility against the parties.

Now we are at the final act of the explosive drama, the trigger stage. While popular feelings were intensely changing, a second trigger was entering into action. The 1980s had been years of slow but continuous restrictive policies aimed at reducing the huge and dangerous public deficit. The traditional compensatory public interventions, which Italians were used to, became more and more difficult to provide. The increasing burden of taxation fell upon middle income categories and upon northern regions whether or not benefits were reduced. Progressively, the North (the richest part of the country), felt spoiled and abandoned the traditional parties, mainly the Christian Democrats, who had some of their past bulwarks there. The roots of the newly emerged opposition, the Lombard League, were there. The revolt of still loyal tax payers became a political investment in this new party and the

League scored first in the North at the beginning of the nineties.

At that point corruption was discovered on a wide and unexpected scale. This was the third and final trigger that, together with the others, ensured a wide distribution of the disruptive effects. From the initial case, dealing with a minor episode of bribes in Milan, investigations were broadened thanks to a flood of admissions by entrepreneurs. A net of illegal financial relations came to light. All the traditional parties who had responsibilities either in national or in local government seemed to be involved, but the Christian Democrats and the Socialists more deeply than the others. Their General Secretaries were directly charged and prosecuted. Judicial actions are still on the horizon, but politically the sentence has been pronounced. Recent local elections demonstrate that the Socialists and the minor parties of the previous majority have almost vanished, while the Christian Democrats have fallen under 20 percent. The new major parties, chosen by direct election for the first time, have gone either to the leftist coalitions around the PDS (the former Communist Party), to the Northern League or to the right wing MSI. At the moment Italian electors are revolting against the center and leaning to the extremes. We cannot know as yet whether this is a temporary reaction, whether new personalities and new political parties can restore credibility in the area of the present losers, or whether the extreme parties will become less extreme to catch the moderate electors, who now feel landless. A definite answer might come far beyond the next political elections expected in early spring 1994.

Whatever its outcome, this new political cycle is beyond the horizon of my short review here. My purpose was to investigate, through the Italian case, the interactions between longstanding trends and supervening factors of change, between entropies that prevent self-reform and outbursts of revolt. To this purpose, the relevant cycle goes from the sunrise to what already appears as the sunset of the first Italian Republic.