

L'Italia vista da fuori, or: It depends on your point of view

James L. Newell

School of Arts and Media

University of Salford

j.l.newell@salford.ac.uk

Introduction

The title of my talk is *'L'Italia vista da fuori'*. By 'Italy' I mean Italian politics and society. When I talk about how Italy is viewed from abroad I am referring to the perceptions, attitudes and public expressions thereof of foreign political actors and other opinion leaders such as journalists and academics. There are, I think, at least three good reasons for considering this issue.

The first, and most obvious is that the way in which the affairs of a country are perceived by more or less powerful foreigners has a significant impact on the affairs of the country itself. It affects the standing of the country on the world stage and thus the ability of the country to pursue its foreign-policy goals. At one level this is obvious: a country viewed by other powerful countries as a pariah state or a refuge for terrorists, say, finds itself in a very different position vis-à-vis those countries than one perceived as an ally. But it also works in more subtle ways: as Joseph LaPalombara observed in a Toronto speech in 2011 to mark the 150th anniversary of Italian unification:

Fascism's incredible follies brought Italy – economically, politically and psychologically— to an extreme state of prostration. The postwar diplomatic traffic among the victorious Allies described the country as a basket case. President Truman, for example, had to have his arm twisted before he agreed to the idea that Italy should be made a member of the Atlantic alliance.

And of course in today's globalised world the perceptions of foreign political and economic actors can be huge in their implications as the Eurozone crisis has highlighted so dramatically – highlighting also that foreign perceptions are significant not just for a country's position in international affairs but also for its domestic politics, on the course of which they can often have a dramatic impact. A very good example of this, in the Italian case, came in 2011. To a significant degree it was the perceptions of Angela Merkel and Nicholas Sarkozy of Berlusconi's capacities as a prime minister that led to the demise of his government and to the advent of what was arguably the third technocratic government since the fall of the Berlin Wall. This process was one that enabled the President of the Republic to have a decisive impact on the course of events, leading to suggestions that Italy had de facto acquired a semi-presidential system of government, not to mention suggestions on the part of some, more partisan, observers that Berlusconi had been undemocratically removed from office thanks to a foreign conspiracy. Interestingly, the perceptions of foreigners – not just those of single powerful actors, but those shared by opinion leaders generally – can have an impact on a country's politics that is quite independent of any basis that they have in the facts, giving rise to powerful self-fulfilling prophecies. I came across a very good example of this not so long ago when I was doing some research for a piece on political corruption. In an article on the United States' Foreign Corrupt Practices Act, Stuart Campbell (2013) notes that 'International corporations have been faced with the challenge of

complying with the [Act] in nations whose cultural and legal treatment of corruption can vary widely.' Forced, in their efforts to comply with the legislation, to reply on international indices of *perceptions* of corruption (about which I will say more later), firms have been deterred from investing in countries scoring high on such indices. And naturally, as the absence of inward investment in countries is a significant cause of corruption, so to that extent might the indices arguably contribute to the corruption they purport to measure! So how Italy is viewed from abroad may have consequences every bit as real as any reality on which such perceptions may or may not be based.

A second reason for considering the issue is that, as I shall explain later, many of the academic perceptions of Italy viewed from abroad can I think be argued to be problematic and/or unhelpful.

A third reason for considering the issue, more prosaically, is that how Italy is viewed from abroad is a matter that appears to have acquired growing salience among political scientists in recent years. In 2006, the Società Italiana di Scienza Politica sponsored a panel on the topic at its annual conference in Bologna; the Italian Politics Specialist Group of the UK Political Studies Association is organising a symposium on the same theme to be held at the University of Urbino on 17 December of this year, and on 12 February next year, the Association for the Study of Modern Italy is organising, in Paris, a conference on 'British and French perspectives on Italian politics', the idea being to consider overseas interpretations of the current trajectory of the Republic.

With all this in mind, in the remainder of what I have to say, I want to consider four questions:

- 1) What is it that might explain the growing academic interest in the issue of *l'Italia vista da fuori*, how Italy is viewed from abroad?
- 2) What is the character and substance of these perceptions?
- 3) How accurate are they?
- 4) Accurate or otherwise, how can they be accounted for? What has given rise to them?

These are of course all admittedly large questions, ones whose surfaces can merely be scratched within the framework of a short intervention such as the present one. Nevertheless, I think that some useful things can be said. And it goes without saying of course that in seeking to address the question I, as a foreigner, will implicitly be saying something about my own perspectives on Italian politics.

The growing academic interest

My answer to the first question is necessarily somewhat speculative (though speculation in research obviously has its place). The first factor I would refer to has to do with the growing interest of the foreign media in Italy. This, though difficult to substantiate conclusively, seems pretty strongly supported, at least if we consider the Anglo-Saxon media. Let us take the *Economist*, the *Times* and the *Guardian*. Between 1990 and 1993 there were, in the *Economist*, 5.6 articles per year on average

with the words 'Italy' or 'Italian' in the title; from 1994 to 2009 there were 7.5. In the *Times* and the *Guardian*, there were 323 such articles per year on average between 1986 and 1993, and 460 between 1994 and 2009 (Bull and Newell, 2011: 20).

And this growing interest, incidentally, seems only natural to expect. First, the country has in recent years been of much greater significance on the world stage – freed, by the end of the Cold War, to pursue a much more independent foreign policy; constrained, by the advent of the Eurozone, to pursue fiscal and monetary policies under the much more watchful eyes of international institutions. The country's domestic politics have become much more difficult for outsiders to understand since the collapse of the Berlin Wall. Prior to that, things were relatively simple: the Christian Democrats were always in office; the Communists always in opposition, and partly as a consequence of this, legislative innovation was a rarity: encouraged by the electoral imperatives of the Cold War, and relatively untouched by the 'normal' mechanisms of political accountability thanks to the *conventio ad excludendum* practiced against the Communists, the DC and its allies were encouraged to practice a politics of clientelism which, by creating large numbers of veto players, obstructed major policy initiatives. Since then, things have become much more complicated: there have been one, now possibly two, transformations in the structure and dynamics of the party system; there has been the transformation of old parties and the emergence and growth of new ones, and there have been repeated – successful and unsuccessful – attempts at institutional reform. Finally, the attention of the foreign media (which, after all, are driven by commercial imperatives to generate news focussing on the personal and the colourful) has been irresistibly attracted by controversial and larger-than-life public personalities: Silvio Berlusconi, first – with his extraordinary career, his conflict of interests and his success, for a long time, in making his political role itself the single most important issue of contention in Italian politics – and Beppe Grillo second – with his extraordinary success in breaking down the barrier separating satire from active politics (2014: 171), this as the leader of a political movement which in 2013 rendered inoperable the two fundamental assumptions on which government formation had hitherto been based: consensual power sharing or majoritarianism. To these two personalities we might now, possibly, add a third: Matteo Renzi.

A second factor has to do with widespread beliefs on the part of Italians themselves – social and political elites but also Italian citizens more generally – that the politics of their country are defective (something they of course share with the publics of other advanced democracies in relation to the politics of *their* countries) – but also, and less commonly, that their politics compare unfavourably with the politics of other, similar, countries and as a consequence constitute an 'anomaly'. The citizens of most countries regard themselves as anomalous or exceptional in some ways. As one foreign observer of Italy, Donald Sassoon (2013), recently pointed out, the French talk about *exception*

française; nationalist discourse in Britain suggests that there is something special with British development; the term American exceptionalism is widely used in that country; in Germany, historians talk of *Sonderweg* or 'special path'. But in all these cases, exceptionalism is seen as having a positive valence, whereas in the Italian case, it is viewed negatively, as evidence that the country is, in some not very clear sense, not normal. 'Thus Massimo D'Alema ... wrote a book in 1995 called *Un paese normale*, his ambition for Italy; a collection of essays by the late Enzo Biagi recently published by Rizzoli was given the title of *Consigli per un paese normale*; on 4 August 2010 Dario Franceschini, former leader of the ... Democratic Party declared in the Chamber of Deputies '*Non viviamo in un paese normale*'.

Why Italian elites have this view is something I will come back to later, but for now the point I want to make is that when we feel negative about ourselves, we are likely to be unusually attuned to, not to say sensitive about, the perceptions of others. So Italians' belief that the quality of democracy in their country leaves much to be desired as compared to democracy in countries such as Britain and the US gives the judgements of media in these countries unusual prominence. As any politically aware British person who has lived for an extended period in Italy will know, RAI news broadcasts are much more likely to give space to foreign media discussion of stereotypically Italian political personalities and issues – Silvio Berlusconi; administrative inefficiency; organised crime – than BBC broadcasts ever give to foreign representations of stereotypically British personalities and issues – the Queen; drunkenness; football hooliganism. So my basic point is that because of the growing foreign media interest in Italy, and because Italians are especially attuned to these media, so there has been a growing interest in the perspectives on Italy that are conveyed by them.

The character and substance

What, then, is the character and substance of the perspectives coming from abroad? If we consider academic perspectives first of all, then traditionally, these seem to have reflected Italian elites' own perspectives on their country's politics in being overwhelmingly negative in character. Writing in 1995, the British historian, Paul Ginsborg (1995: 4), noted: 'nearly all Italian commentators... employ almost exclusively negative categories to analyse recent Italian history' – adding that the interpretation that emerges from their work is 'monochrome, unilinear', 'perforce catastrophic', and one that 'has a very long tradition in modern Italian studies'. There have been some exceptions to this, Joseph LaPalombara's work, *Democracy Italian Style* (1987) being an obvious example; and there has been some discussion of what, to foreign observers, seemed to be the paradox of institutions and processes one would expect to be conducive to economic weakness sitting alongside the performance of an advanced industrial economy that has not on the whole been bad and at times in the post-war period

very good. Significantly, one of the early textbooks on Italian politics in English, Spotts' and Wieser's *Italy, A Difficult Democracy* (1986), carried on its front cover the famous phrase, attributed to Galileo Galilei, 'Eppur si muove'. Yet it is enough to recall the titles of the most well-known of the books published by foreign scholars of Italy to find confirmation that, qualified or not, perspectives have been essentially negative.¹

More recently, presumably as a consequence of the accumulation of research and writing in the field of comparative politics, some of the more negative perspectives have been challenged or at least qualified by both Italian and foreign writers who have pointed out that a number of the perceived shortcomings of Italian politics are traits which are in fact qualitatively no different from phenomena to be found in other European democracies (implying that in reality Italy is no anomaly). For example, if Italian politics has been dominated in recent decades by such colourful personalities as Berlusconi, a politician who was able to rise to power by skilfully employing the techniques of modern campaigning, then, as Cristian Vaccari has noted, he did not invent the techniques he used – the techniques being in fact 'commonplace across Western democracies by the time [Forza Italia] was founded' (2015: 28). Beppe Grillo was by no means the first comedian to launch himself into the world of politics: already by the early 1980s two such attempts had been made in France (Barbieri, 2014: 172). Again, if populism and anti-political sentiments are widespread in Italy, then, as Marco Tarchi (2015) has noted, as *a style of political communication* anti-political populism has in the view of many become a salient feature of the politics of democratic regimes more or less everywhere. Moreover, as *a political movement aiming to mobilise support for regime change*, populism's fortunes have actually been relatively limited in Italy, since it has failed to exceed the 10.2% vote share won by the Northern League in 1996, while elsewhere in Europe the support for such movements 'is located in the range from 12% to 22.7%' (Tarchi, 2015). Looking further back in time, Donald Sassoon notes that in the wake of Giorgio Galli's *Bipartitismo Imperfetto* published in 1967, it became common to complain about the absence of a presumed 'perfect' two-party system and of alternation in office, both presumed to represent a European norm. In fact, only Britain and the US had two large parties with control of government alternating fairly frequently between the two; elsewhere alternation was much rarer, and if the cause of its absence in Italy was the Communist Party, then the party prevented alternation for no other reason than the fact that it 'was never able to obtain a majority either on its

¹ Examples include: *Italy on Borrowed Time* (H. Gibbs, 1953); *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society* (E. Banfield, 1958); *Italy: The Politics of Uneven Development* (R. Zarisky, 1972); *Italy: Republic without Government* (P.A. Allum, 1973); *Governing Without Surviving: The Italian Parties in Parliament* (G. Di Palma, 1977); *Italy: A Difficult Democracy* (F. Spotts and T. Wieser, 1986); *Not a Normal Country: Italy after Berlusconi* (G. Andrews, 2005); *Italy, the Least of the Great Powers* (R.J.B. Bosworth, 2005); *Italy Today: the Sick Man of Europe* (A. Mammone and G.A. Veltri eds, 2010)

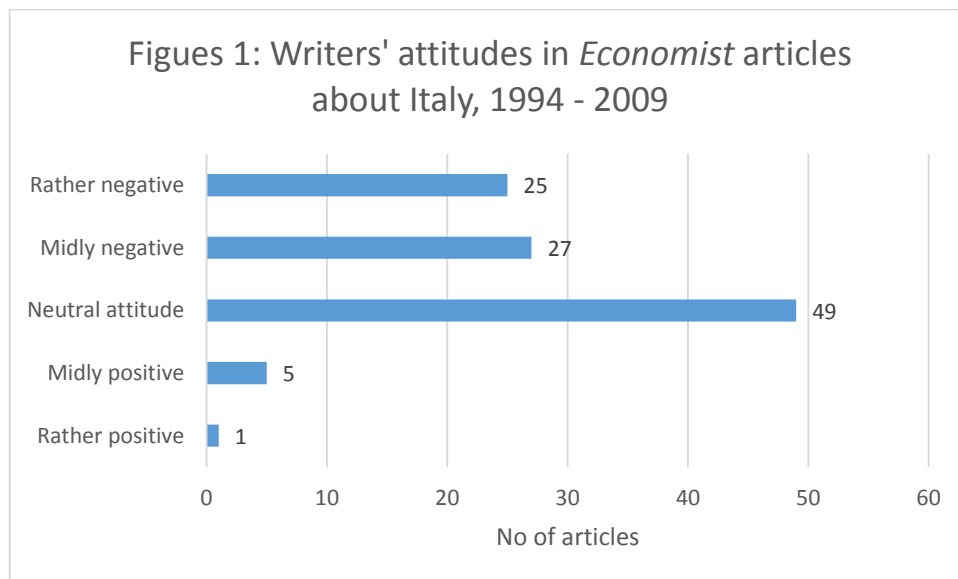
own or with a coalition partner. In 'normal' countries this is exactly what happens when one does not win elections' (Sassoon, 2013).

Today's seemingly more nuanced perspectives appear to be reflected not only in the work of foreign academics, but also in the work of at least some foreign journalists. Bill Emmott, for example, published a book in 2012 called *Good Italy, Bad Italy* whose basic thesis is that the most significant division in Italy is less the geographical one between north and south, than the social and cultural one between what he refers to as selfishness, corruption and nepotism on the one hand – the 'Bad Italy' – and optimism, entrepreneurial flair and a commitment to the collective welfare on the other – the Good Italy. Emmott argues that while the country faces not-to-be-underestimated difficulties thanks to the way in which politicians like Silvio Berlusconi have sought to monopolise power to further their own interests in contravention of norms of due process, civil society shows considerable dynamism, thus giving the lie to suggestions that the country's situation is hopeless. In fact, this juxtaposition between the 'good' and the 'bad' was not a new one: it was already there in the work of Robert Putnam (1993) almost two decades previously when the American academic argued that the quality of democracy differed very significantly between efficient regions, on the one hand, and inefficient ones on the other and that this could be explained in terms of differences in the stock of social capital to be found in them.

So recent years have arguably witnessed a certain rebalancing in terms of the evaluations of Italian politics from abroad although I think it is a fair supposition that in journalists' accounts at least the scales continue to be more heavily weighted towards the negative than towards the positive side. For example, three years ago I carried out a content analysis of a sample of 107 articles with the words 'Italy' or 'Italian' in the titles appearing in the *Economist* magazine between January 1994 and December 2009. The *Economist* seemed to be a good publication to focus upon if only because it tends to be mentioned in the Italian press more frequently than other European and American magazines or newspapers. So, if we want insight into the foreign portrayals of their country that are most likely to influence Italian policy makers and opinion leaders, then we can probably not do much better than to look for them in the pages of the *Economist*. I used the topics writers chose to focus on, the number and nature of their criticisms, if any, and the general tone they adopted to place the articles in one or the other of five categories ranging from rather positive to rather negative designed to reflect the general attitude of the writer towards Italian politics and society.² The results are presented in Figure

² It was necessary to use all three criteria in classifying the pieces: a writer might focus on corruption, for example – something that is negative by definition – but without expressing any specific criticisms; and though he or she might express criticism of the person, institution or event being talked about, this need not necessarily reflect a negative attitude towards any broader category of persons institutions or events.

1 and what we can see is that Italy's politics do not appear to be portrayed in terms that are wildly enthusiastic.

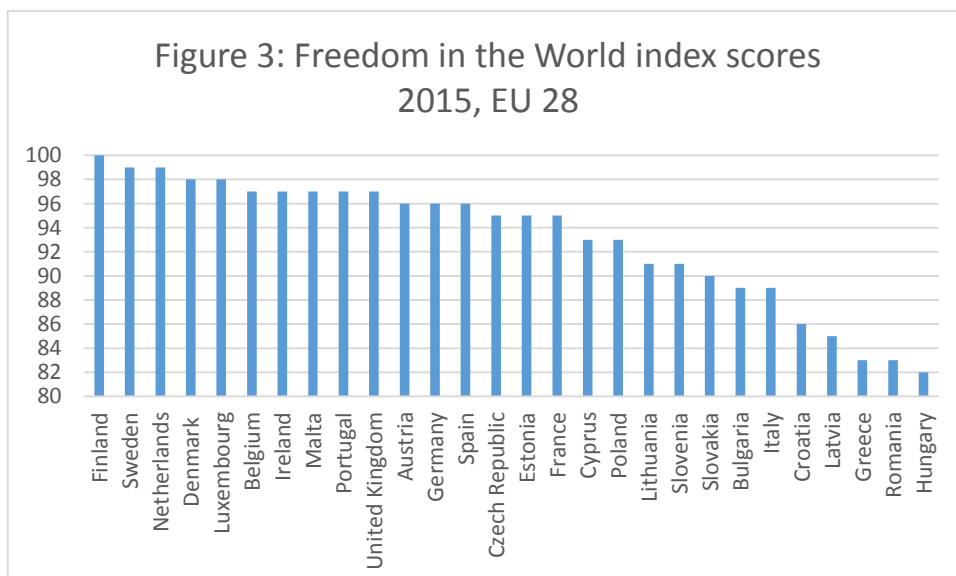
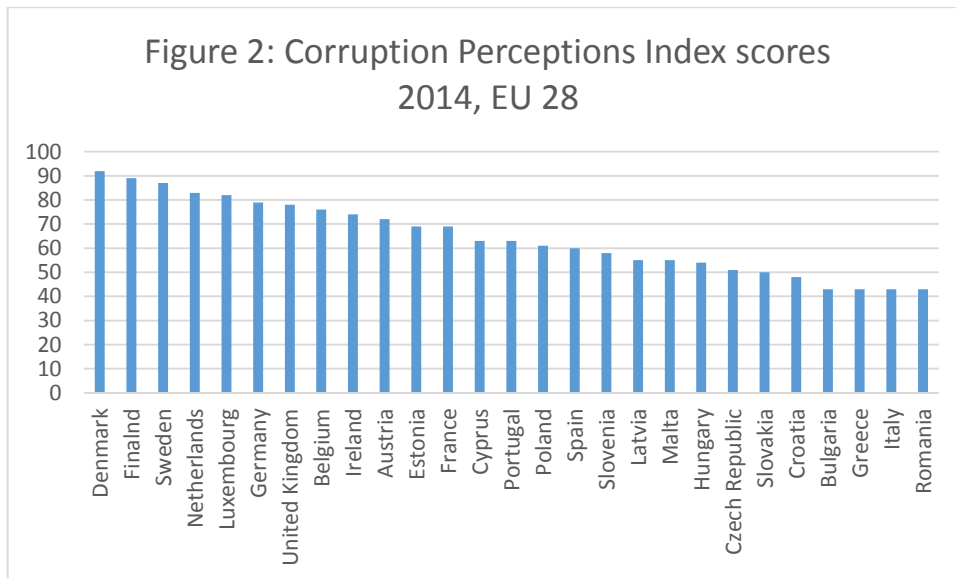


Finally, aside from the portrayals of foreign academics and foreign journalists it is worth briefly mentioning those of foreign opinion leaders more generally, as expressed by the surveys and indices compiled by international organisations such as Transparency International, the World Bank, Freedom House and so on. In 2014, Italy had a score of 43/100 on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index making it, alongside Romania and Greece which had the same score, one of the bottom three countries among the EU 28 (Figure 2). This year, Italy has a score of 89/100 on Freedom House's Freedom in the World index. This draws on the work of analysts and advisors from the academic, think-tank and human rights communities to score countries in term of a series of political rights and civil liberties indicators such as the electoral process and the rule of law. Italy's score places it in 23rd position among the EU 28 (Figure 3). In 2013, Italy had a score of 0.5 on a scale from -2.5 to +2.5 on the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators government effectiveness index which purports to capture 'perceptions of the quality of public services, the quality of the civil service ... the quality of policy formulation and implementation' and so on, and draws on 'data sources produced by a variety of survey institutes, think tanks, non-governmental organizations, international organizations, and private sector firms'.³ Italy's score put it in 25th place among the EU 28 (Figure 4).

³ Worldwide Governance Indicators, <http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/index.aspx#home>

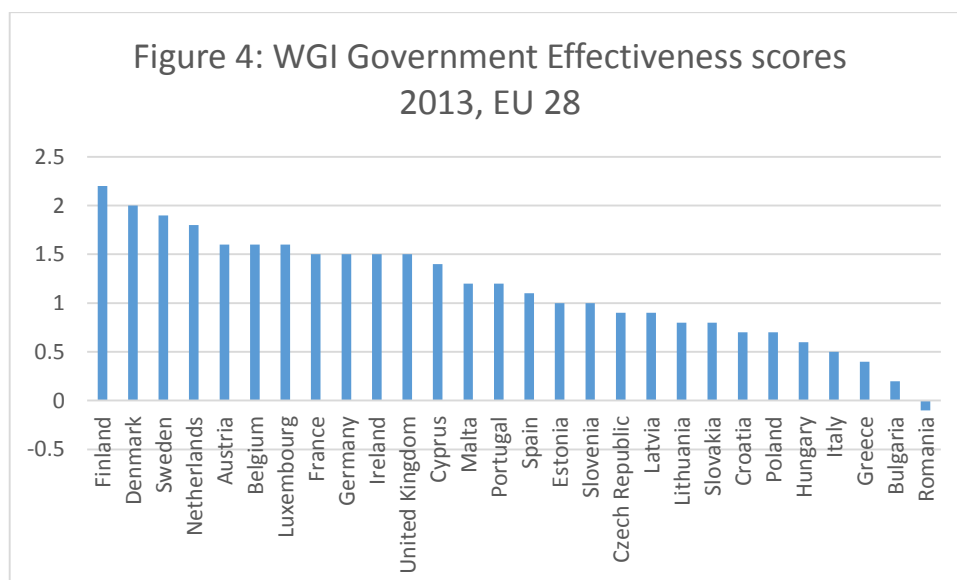
The accuracy

So it seems that Italy's politics and society are not rated especially highly in the international community; yet it is my contention that at least some of the most high-profile allegations about the shortcomings of Italian politics made from abroad down the years are revealed to be inaccurate, misleading or unhelpful when the methodological assumptions on which they are based are subject to close inspection. I will refer to four examples.



One of the earliest, and best known comparative studies of Italian politics is Gabriel Almond's and Sidney Verba's 1963 publication, *The Civic Culture*. This asks about the cultural preconditions for

stable democracy, arguing that its preconditions are to be found in the presence of what they call a ‘civic culture’ which, they suggest, is to be found in Britain and the United States, but not in Italy or the other two countries whose citizens they survey. Their conclusion is that unlike the civic cultures of Britain and the United States, ‘[t]he political culture of Italy does not support a stable and effective democratic system’ (1963: 403). The first problem with the study, then, is that the reasoning on which its conclusion is based is circular. That is, their assumption that Britain and the United States, but not Italy, are examples of stable democracies rests essentially on their evidence that only the former two countries have the civic culture supposedly necessary for such stability in the first place. So not unnaturally they end up concluding that the political culture that is necessary to sustain stable and successful democracy is the culture they find in these two countries but not in Italy. Secondly, if one is seriously to sustain a hypothesis about a causal connection between political culture on the one hand and democratic stability on the other, then logically one has to be in a position to measure each independently. Yet it is difficult to see how, given their understanding of political culture, which they define in terms of citizens’ orientations and attitudes, this can be done. And since it is difficult to see the sense in which we would want to define a democratic system as ‘stable’ or ‘unstable’ if not in terms of its citizens’ orientations to it, one finds it very difficult to avoid the conclusion that their proffered explanation is tautological.



A rather similar conclusion is prompted by some of the other well-known academic interpretations of Italy from abroad such as those of Edward Banfield (1958) and Robert Putnam (1993); for they too sought to explain political behaviour and institutional functioning in Italy by what are essentially attitudinal variables. It is, for example, distinctly difficult to imagine a community

which, despite having citizens that are lacking in Putnam's trust and willingness to cooperate, nevertheless has institutions that are responsive to their constituents and so forth – unless we can assume that ordinary citizens on the one hand, and those who staff the institutions on the other, belong to entirely different cultural realities.

Of course none of this affects any of these authors' substantive points about the content of public attitudes; and yet serious questions remain. For example, if one wants to draw conclusions about the 'success', 'effectiveness', 'stability' and so forth of democracy from citizens' attitudes then it surely makes a difference *whose* attitudes we are talking about. Almond and Verba (1963: 99), for example, note that 38 per cent of their Italian respondents are alienated or parochial in terms of the questionnaire items measuring their perceptions of the impact of government on their lives and the extent to which they follow politics. But given that politics is not a central life interest for most people, such findings may not matter very much if, as Giacomo Sani (1980: 281) noted at the time, opinion makers and the articulate segments of the [Italian] population ... shared, during the postwar period, a common democratic ethos'. This, he noted, was an ethos that was shared 'in spite of marked ideological divergences', one founded on a system that 'had overcome strong initial handicaps, and ...demonstrated its capacity to function if not perfectly at least reasonably well'.

A third example concerns a well-known journalistic stereotype, the one that links Italian politics, more so than elsewhere, with corruption. As I was preparing this piece I did a search on the web site of the *Guardian*, a newspaper that has a reputation for serious and generally balanced reporting. Of the items containing the phrase 'British politics', a mere 0.6% also contained the word 'corruption', while of the items containing the phrase 'Italian politics' no fewer than 23% did so – thus confirming the fairly routine way in which the issue appears in foreign, or at least British, reporting of the country's politics. As we have seen, perceptions that corruption is a major problem can have real consequences regardless of any underlying reality. However, in the present case such a perception needs to be challenged on a number of levels.

First, we should note that the term corruption refers to a type of rule infringement so that while the behaviour in question is illegitimate by definition, its status as 'corrupt' is entirely relative to acceptance of the rules it infringes. In other words, as a phenomenon it has no existence that is independent of socially defined conceptions of what is right and wrong. This is immediately clear as soon as one asks what it is that makes something like Mario Chiesa's acceptance of payments in exchange for cleaning contracts an act of corruption but not a cigarette manufacturer's legal donations to the British Conservative Party on the tacit understanding – as we are not naïve – that the government will go soft on the issue of tobacco advertising. So if an outsider condemns a society on the grounds that there is a great deal of what they call corruption there but the inhabitants of that

society view things differently, then there are no extra-discursive, independent grounds available that would allow us to adjudicate between them: corruption only exists to the extent that there is consensus on what counts as corruption. Without this consensus, we have no basis on which to suggest that corruption is any more or less of a problem in Italy than anywhere else.

Second, even though it can be argued that such consensus does in fact exist in the present case – the penal codes of most EU member states for example define it similarly, referring in one way or another to breaches of trust induced by bribery – nothing follows from *beliefs* about the presence of corruption so defined for its *actual* presence given that actors typically try to hide such behaviour. So the fact is that, the Corruption Perceptions Index and high-profile media cases notwithstanding, we simply don't know whether corruption is more widespread in Italy than in most other EU member states, merely that opinion leaders, both abroad and in Italy appear to *think* it is.

Thirdly, even if we had reliable means of establishing corruption's actual presence, it would not follow that we had good grounds to worry about it. On the one hand, there is corruption that is high-level and systemic; on the other hand, corruption can in principle take place at lower levels and be more sporadic in nature. The former, unlike the latter kind is not likely to damage investment and prosperity because it is predictable: it can be factored into firms' calculations and functions essentially like a tax. This may in part be why the politicians who financed their parties through payoffs, far from showing contrition, felt so aggrieved when caught up in the Clean Hands investigations of the early 1990s. Though not especially laudable it was perfectly understandable that they should ask why, when this was the commonly, if tacitly, accepted way parties were financed they were now being 'picked upon'. What *might* be worrying from the point of view of democracy – given that bribery turns political rights into privately traded goods – is a situation in which citizens were resigned to it. But then we need to ask ourselves about the extent to which this is in fact the case in Italy. The evidence suggests that people are, by and large, not so resigned. Otherwise, how do we explain the support for parties and movements such as that of Grillo and before him of Antonio di Pietro? Surely, the fact that corruption when it is exposed provokes massive public outrage, that it is often the substance of scandal and regularly leads to the demise of high level politicians etc., speaks to the strength of democracy and democratic values in that country not to their weakness.

My fourth example concerns another well-known stereotype, the one that sees organised crime as an unusually significant problem in Italy. In this case I found that of the *Guardian* items that contained the phrase 'Italian politics', no fewer than 56% also contained the word 'Mafia' (or 'mafia') or the phrase 'organised (or organized) crime' or both. Of course it would be foolish to deny that criminality is a significant problem in Italy. But to a greater extent than elsewhere? According to the

World Bank,⁴ there were three intentional homicides per 100,000 people in Italy between 2010 and 2012 as compared to the same number in Denmark and New Zealand, double the number in Belgium and five times the number in the United States.

Very similar points can be made in relation to this issue as I made in relation to the issue of corruption. What are we to understand by the term 'organised crime'? Organisation is a matter of degree: 'There is some degree of organization even in a group of two middle-class girls who, on the way home from school, drift into Woolworths and shoplift some lipsticks' (Cressey, 1972: 12). So given the difficulties of using the term 'organised crime' to distinguish one type of crime from another, if we refrain, for a moment, from allowing ourselves to be distracted by high-profile cases like the mafia and the camorra, on what basis are we to say that organised crime has a stronger presence in Italy than elsewhere? We are social scientists, after all, with a professional obligation to resist the temptation to take conventional wisdom and what commonly passes for knowledge for granted.

Again, it would be foolish to question the sometimes devastating impact that organisations like the mafia and the camorra can have and have had in the areas where they have been strong. But can we really accept the images peddled by the international film industry and from time to time by the agents of law enforcement who after all have a vested interest in exaggerating the significance of the threats they are paid to deal with? That is, how much credence can we really give to images of these organisations that portray them as being akin to underground multi-national corporations? For one thing, it strikes me that their credibility comes up against the problem of trust. That is, the very illegality of their activity exposes criminal entrepreneurs to the constant threat of denunciation to the agencies of law enforcement and therefore places them under pressure to limit their number of customers and employees as vulnerable points of information leak (Paoli, 2003: 35). Much more credible, then, it strikes me, is the work of a scholar such as Letizia Paoli (2000) whose investigations suggest that far from being large organisations having a complex internal division of labour and organisation-wide goals, mafia groups are locally-based entities held together by mechanical solidarity whose capacity for coordinated activity is limited by the self-defeating quality of the generalised reciprocity on which they are based and the limited pool of potential members from which they can recruit (Newell, 2005; Paoli, 2000; Standing, 2003).

Do not misunderstand me: I am not suggesting that all foreign observers of Italian politics are fools or that their observations are always and inevitably groundless. What I am suggesting is that too frequently they fail to interpret Italian politics with the appropriate degree of circumspection and that too often this leads them to conclusions that are negative to a degree that is unwarranted. This then

⁴ <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/VC.IHR.PSRC.P5>

throws a spotlight on the final question that I want to address, namely, how we can account for this tendency.

The explanation

I want to suggest an explanation that is both methodological and sociological in that it refers both to the epistemological and ontological assumptions on which accounts are often based and to a theory about the social conditions that govern the production of (what passes for) knowledge.

If we wish to avoid interpretations of a foreign society that merely reproduce ‘the folklore or prejudices about the foreign country which already exist in [our] own society’ (Scheuch, 1967, quoted by Dogan and Pelassy, 1990: 70) – and I assume that as scholars we do wish to avoid them – then we have to be sensitive to the context in which the action we are observing takes place and to the meaning that actors themselves attach to their actions; and it seems to me that problems of the kind that I have alluded to arise to a significant extent because observers too frequently rely on quantitative research methods whose application yields ‘findings’ that may obstruct achievement of the necessary degree of sensitivity and owe more to the observers’ preconceptions than to genuine familiarity with the reality under investigation. Imagine attempting to measure and compare the stability of political regimes by adding up the number of manifestations of protest reported over a given time period and weighting them accordingly. So petitions might get a score of 1, protest marches a score of 2, occupations a score of 3, riots a score of 4 and so on. The total scores for each country are calculated and compared. No researcher worth his salt would conclude from a finding that Italy has a higher score than China, say, that the regime in Italy is less stable than in the latter country because in Italy protest is a normal and accepted part of the political process whereas in China it is not. S/he would understand that such an approach is misleading because it ignores the meaning of protest actions in the context in which they take place, relying on a counting procedure that assumes the truth of the researcher’s own preconceptions, namely, that each form of protest can be given equal weight in the two contexts. So a researcher worth her salt would probably not employ such approaches at all – and yet in essence they are precisely the approaches that underlie the studies of observers such as Almond and Verba; that underlie the calculation of corruption and freedom indices ... and so on.

And the researcher would hopefully understand, too, the reason why attempts to measure, and to understand social life in terms of cause and effect, can give rise to the problems of tautology I have mentioned in relation to studies like those of Almond and Verba and Putnam: it is that social life is grounded in action, where action is something that is not contingently related to the beliefs and desires and therefore attitudes that supposedly produce it, but logically related. That is, we cannot describe a set of beliefs and desires – for example, the belief that carrying an umbrella will help keep

me dry today – without referring to the actions that are supposedly their effects – carrying an umbrella – because ‘description of the belief makes reference to the action itself’. Vice versa, ‘we cannot describe an action without thereby committing ourselves to the existence of desires and beliefs that contain descriptions of that action’ (Rosenburg, 1988: 38). So beliefs and desires explain action by virtue of being not causes, but reasons, where a ‘reason’ is something that renders the action intelligible by showing it to be rational, appropriate, efficient, reasonable, correct and so forth according to some criteria. And so if we want to explain, uncontaminated by our preconceptions, the social life of a society, we have to understand its members’ reasons for their action – which we may well be prevented from doing if we approach the task with a quantitative epistemology and a causal ontology.

Why, then, have the conclusions of analyses informed by such an approach tended to be so strikingly negative when the subject under scrutiny has been Italian politics? Well, given what I have just said, it clearly has to do with observers’ preconceptions, so why have these tended to be negative? The answer, I think, is two-fold.

On the one hand, it has to some degree to do with what two American authors, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman, referred to in the 1960s as the social construction of reality and the implications of this for human beings’ judgments of the world around them. In brief, Berger and Luckman argue that the recurrent patterns of interaction we call institutions are both inherently fragile – because they *only* exist by virtue of humans’ on-going interactions which can of course change – and essential for human survival – because they remove the potential dangers involved in interaction by rendering the actions of others predictable. Institutions therefore come to embody shared knowledge about ‘correct’ and ‘incorrect’ forms of behaviour, so that the individual’s social world becomes, for him or her, the world *tout court*, and what is taken for granted as knowledge in his or her particular society comes to provide ‘the framework within which anything not yet known will come to be known in the future’ (Berger and Luckman, 1967: 75). When confronted with other societies and alternative ways of doing things, the individual feels threatened because the very existence of an alternative symbolic universe ‘demonstrates empirically that one’s own universe is less than inevitable. As anyone can see now, it is possible to live in this world without the institution of cousinhood after all. And it is possible to deny or even mock the gods of cousinhood without at once causing the downfall of the heavens. This shocking fact must be accounted for theoretically, if nothing more’. And ‘[t]he alternative universe presented by the other society must be met with the best possible reasons for the superiority of one’s own....’ (Berger and Luckman, 1967: 126).

Secondly, I suspect that foreign observers’ negative perceptions of Italian politics to some degree reflect Italians’ own negative assessments of the politics of their country. Owing to the

circumstances surrounding Italian unification – a process that was essentially elite driven, that stifled popular pressures for radical social change and had significant immediate-term costs for ordinary people – the Italian state has historically found it very difficult to acquire the authority to generate unequivocal allegiance to the constitutional and liberal values – of universalism, guaranteed rights and formal equality before the law – which other states in other, more favourable, historical circumstances found it easier to generate. Italian political and economic elites have always perceived this as a problem because it has stood in the way of their ability to drive forward what they understand as ‘progress’, namely, a process of capitalist economic and industrial expansion, especially in the *Mezzogiorno*, that would enable the country to keep pace with international economic and political developments. The most recent and most vocal expression of such concern arguably came in the late 1990s at the time of European monetary union. Then, doubts about whether Italy would be included in the first round of the union led to a series of incisive economic measures – an overhaul of public finances; administrative decentralisation; privatisation; labour-market reform – all designed to ensure that the country would *aggianciare il treno europeo*. If success in so doing merely led, as it did, to the widely held conclusion that reform and improvement in the Italian political system could only come when imposed from the outside, then one could not help wondering whether this was a classic example of cognitive dissonance and the attempt to reduce it by interpreting new information in such a way as to render it consistent with prior beliefs. What can we conclude from all of this?

Conclusion

First, Italian politics have tended on the whole to be viewed negatively from abroad because they have been compared with the politics of other democracies using criteria that are inherently normative in nature. To state the obvious, a country’s politics can only be compared with the politics of other countries by reference to one or more standards or concepts such as efficiency, effectiveness, fairness, stability, freedom, the rule of law, the quality of democracy and so on. The problem is that it is not possible to define any of these concepts except by reference to rules – corruption is a type of rule infringement, democracy is said to be of high quality when certain rules are observed and so on – and as we know, a rule is something whose infringement is to some greater or lesser degree morally condemned in the group whose social existence gives rise to it. So to use such concepts as criteria of measurement, observation and analysis is necessarily to make a value judgement about what we are observing.

Second, when Italy has been compared with other democracies in these terms, she has often been described as an anomaly, and yet it is difficult to see how such a suggestion can actually be substantiated. To make it is to assume the appropriateness of a set of criteria for comparison – which

merely begs the question. But even then, to establish the existence of an anomaly, one would have to compare the criteria with a cross-country average, identifying those that are above and below it – and yet what one would almost certainly find is that Italy, like any other country, is above average on some, below average on others. So what would this tell us? ‘For instance Great Britain tops the league of cocaine users, beating Spain, the USA, and Canada. Italy is just above the EU average; Germany just below and France well below. Is that a British ‘anomaly’?’ (Sassoon, 2013).

Third, despite all this, negative stereotypes and clichés about Italy continue to abound. They would lose much of their power if in place of quantitative, comparative approaches we were to use qualitative and interpretive approaches, eschewing attempts to measure anti-political sentiments, clientelism, tax evasion and all the other phenomena underpinning the most common stereotypes in favour of more concerted efforts to render these phenomena intelligible through greater sensitivity to their context and the meaning for those involved. Then we would appreciate that though anti-political sentiments do seem to be more pervasive in Italy than in many other democracies, the sentiments have tended not to be expressed in destabilising support for mass movements but to be expressed in responses of an individualistic kind such as clientelism; that clientelism, though it has undemocratic implications, has also been a stabilising phenomenon since it represents an alternative to the search for collective solutions to common problems; that tax evasion, though subversive of confidence in the efficacy of the public authorities, also has something quintessentially democratic about it in that when in the past the authorities sometimes tolerated it, this had to do with the art of making do and the search for creative compromises. Instead of being limited to invidious comparisons, we would be able to understand the politics of Italy in its own terms, and to understand how it *actually* works, avoiding fruitless speculation about how it *might* work if only it were more similar to the politics of some other country or to some idealised standard. We would be able to understand that among the advanced liberal democracies, Italy, like all of the others has its own way of doing things and that in that respect as in so many others is very much a normal country.

References

- Almond, Gabriel A. and Sidney Verba (1963), *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Banfield, Edward C. (1958), *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society*, New York: The Free Press.
- Barbieri, Giovanni (2014), ‘Lo tsunami tour’, *Comunicazione Politica*, no. 1/2014, pp.171-85.
- Berger, Peter and Thomas Luckman (1967), *The Social Construction of Reality*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Bull, Martin J and James L Newell (2011), ‘Negatività in nome del liberalismo: Ritratti dell’Italia

- nell'*Economost'*, *Comunicazione Politica*, no. 1/2011, pp.17-37.
- Campbell, Stuart Vincent (2013), 'Perception is not Reality: The FCPA, Brazil, and the Mismeasurement of Corruption', *Minnesota Journal of International Law*, vol. 22, no. 1, pp.247-281
- Cressey, Donald R. (1972) *Criminal Organization*, London: Heinemann.
- Dogan, Mattei and Dominique Pelassy (1990), *How to Compare Nations: Strategies in Comparative Politics*, 2nd edition, Chatham NJ: Chatham House.
- Emmott, Bill (2012), *Good Italy, Bad Italy*, Yale: Yale University Press.
- Galli, Giorgio (1967), *Il bipartitismo imperfetto: Comunisti e democristiani in Italia*, Bologna: il Mulino.
- Ginsborg, Paul (1995), 'Italian Political Culture in Historical Perspective', *Modern Italy*, 1(1), 3-17.
- LaPalombara, Joseph (1987), *Democracy Italian Style*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Newell, James L. (2005), 'Organised crime and corruption: the case of the Sicilian mafia', paper presented to the Seventh Colloquium on Cross-border Crime in Europe, Faculty of Criminal Justice Sciences, University of Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, 6-8 October
- Paoli, Letizia (2000), *Fratelli di mafia: Cosa Nostra e Ndrangheta*, Bologna: il Mulino.
- Paoli, Letizia (2003), 'The 'invisible hand of the market': the illegal drugs trade in Germany, Italy and Russia', pp.19-40 in Petrus C. van Duyne, Klaus von Lampe and James L. Newell (eds), *Criminal Finances and Organising Crime in Europe*, Nijmegen: Wolf Legal Publishers.
- Putnam, Robert (1993), *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Rosenberg, Alexander (1988), *Philosophy of Social Science*, Boulder: Westview Press.
- Tarchi, Marco (2015), 'Italy: The Promised Land of Populism?', *Contemporary Italian Politics*, 7(3), forthcoming.
- Sani, Giacomo (1980), 'The Political Culture of Italy: Continuity and Change', in Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba (eds), *The Civic Culture Revisited*, Newbury Park, London and New Delhi: Sage.
- Sassoon, Donald (2013) 'The Italian Anomaly?' *Comparative European Politics*, 11, 280-95.
- Spotts, Frederic and Theodor Wieser (1986), *Italy: A Difficult Democracy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Standing, André (2003), 'How can crime be organised?' <http://www.iss.co.za/Pubs/Monographs/No77/Chap2.html>
- Vaccari, Cristian (2015), 'The features, impact and legacy of Berlusconi's campaigning techniques, language and style', *Modern Italy*, 20(1), 25-39.