

A Lesson in Italian Democracy from the Maestro

Gianfranco Pasquino, *Italian Democracy. How it Works* (London: Routledge, 2020) (ISBN: 978-1-138-30186-3), pbk.

Embarking, in the early 1980s, on the study of Italian politics with a primitive command of the language, very few resources available in English, and Italian newspapers largely impenetrable to an outsider, I discovered the work of Gianfranco Pasquino, which stood out for the clarity of both its (Italian) language and explanations. Over time, I discovered that he could achieve the same thing in the English language – a real advantage to beginners in those years. I have been reading Pasquino ever since – where by now he stands out as the doyen and Maestro of Italian politics. And this work is, in many ways, the culmination of a life-long study of the politics of his nation – and we hope not his last word.

It is not just his knowledge of the subject area and command of the written word that makes this book so compelling. Pasquino's touch comes also from his wide-ranging knowledge of the politics of other countries, his deep understanding of comparative politics and the comparative method and his willingness to adopt a critical stance towards his subject matter, while still managing to retain scientific impartiality. Indeed, in this work Pasquino explicitly wears his heart on his sleeve. It is evident that he tires of stereotypes of the Italian case ('frequently formulated by Italian scholars and commentators and then repeated by scholars and commentators outside Italy' – p. 1), and authors who 'seem unwilling to criticize the country they are studying and whose politics they are describing.' (p. 1). Not so Pasquino, who of course served his country in the Senate in the 1980s and 1990s, and his willingness to lambast deficiencies where they could be overcome makes the reading of the text all the more enjoyable. In short, this is the book I would have wanted somebody to place on my desk back in the early 1980s, and this is the book any aspiring new scholar (or an expert of another country's politics) who wants a solid grasp of this complex polity, should start with today.

Chapter 1 is a masterful journey through the historical development of Italy as a 'classic parliamentary republic', why it made the choices it did (compared with other nations), and how it became distinctive. Institutions matter, of course, but in Italy they have taken on an importance as a scapegoat for Italy's (presumed) ills out of all proportion to reality. As Pasquino writes, 'the Italian problem does not lie with the institutions, that the model of parliamentary government remains viable, and that the culprits behind the not so poor functioning of the political system are Italian parties and leaders, their inability to recruit, train and promote a decent political class, and the party system itself.' (p.21)

The first of these institutions, covered in Chapter 2, is the electoral system. This will be a surprise for those not versed in Italian politics, yet in Italy it has proved to be not just a significant shaper of party competition and therefore the way in which institutions have functioned, but also, in the past 25 years, an instrument of partisan struggle, subject to incessant reform, to no evident purpose or benefit. Pasquino takes us through these reforms explaining in immaculate detail how and why the reforms mattered (to the different parties). He is scathing of their behaviour and of the latest version of the electoral system which will not, he predicts, stand the test of time.

Chapter 3 turns to the political parties, where Pasquino charts the development of 'partyocracy' ('an excessive amount of power held by the parties that control too many economic and social resources') in the post-war period. Starting from Schattschneider ('the parties created democracy and modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of parties'), Pasquino shows (all too briefly) how Italian democracy (or party government) was shaped by the particular role played by parties, and how this also established the conditions for the 'collapse' of the parties and party system in 1992-94. The bulk of the chapter is then spent on exploring the new parties and party system, arguing that, even after over 25 years, this system remains fluid and transitional, with the future 'stabilities' unknown (and, of note, is how his own text on some individual parties already needs updating). The parties today, he argues, are 'personalist' or 'personalized', based very much

on the imprint of their leaders, which explains much about their level of change when leaders change, operating in a multiparty format. The considerable stability in voting in the early period of the Republic has given way to electoral volatility and a set of parties that have failed to establish a political culture of representation and leadership. Their 'decline' continues unabated.

Chapter 4 extends this analysis to parliament and how its functioning has been distinctly affected by a combination of its institutional traits and the performance of the parties. One comes away with a much better understanding of how Italian bicameralism is not the real problem, and how many of the reformists miss the point. It is more the nature of the parties and their programmes and the nature of the party system and how it fails to deliver the sort of 'cohesion' needed. Italian parliamentarians fear the sanction of party and factional leaders over any fear of the voters or interest groups – and that is in many ways the crux of the problem. In the last part of the chapter he looks at *trasformismo* (effectively, opposition MPs being bought off to support the government or crossing the floor to join a grouping that is supporting the government) showing how a phenomenon that had a strong tradition in pre-Fascist Italy and which disappeared under the Republic until the early 1990s has seen its re-emergence as a practice to the fore.

In Chapter 5 on Governments, Pasquino argues that 'instability has been the hallmark of Italian governments', but this empirical fact has been too quickly and readily associated with the poor functioning of Italian democracy, when the record is mixed. Indeed, a closer analysis reveals that there are good reasons for this instability and, rather than being a significant problem for the political system, instability and ministerial reshuffles have actually served as a substitute for the lack of alternation that Italy experienced in the first phase of its Republic, and, in a second phase, have helped to synchronize politics with society. The chapter is packed full of empirical information on the governments of the Republic, taking us right up to the two coalition governments formed by the Five Star Movement, the significance of which can be understood much more clearly through the chapter's historical trajectory.

Accounts of Italian government, politics and democracy tend gloss over the Presidency (relative to other institutions). Pasquino devotes an entire chapter (and theory – of the accordion) to it (Chapter 6), and by the end one is convinced that he is right to do so, especially in relation to the period since the early 1990s, which has, as he demonstrably shows, witnessed decision-making by Presidents which has had a decisive impact on the trajectory of Italian politics. In other words, the development of Italian democracy cannot be properly understood through glib references to the role of the Italian President. Rather, we have to understand how Presidents, since the early 1990s, have been allowed to ‘play their accordion’ (and go beyond what most former Presidents could reasonably do) precisely because of the decline, disarray and weakness of the political parties. Presidential actions, moreover, have almost invariably been to protect the political system, safeguard the Constitution and improve the working of the political system.

Pasquino’s core approach to understanding Italian democracy is an institutional one. Yet, as one would expect from a long-term adherent to David Easton’s systems analysis of political life, he doesn’t overlook civil society and its relationship to politics. In an ambitious Chapter 7 he weaves various threads together – political culture, patronage, organised crime, political corruption, trade unions, post-materialism, trust, social capital – to present a forceful impression on the reader of the complex relationship between civil and political society. In doing so, he reshapes somewhat the conventional notion of ‘political lag’ (that the Italian political system constantly lags behind civil society). One gets the sense that Italians to a large extent get the politics (and therefore governments) they deserve.

Chapter 8 is devoted, on Italy and the European Union, which plots the quite dramatic rise in anti-European sentiment amongst Italians, which, as he emphasises is not just reflected in the rise of anti-European parties (Forza Italia, the League, Five Star Movement) but also in more general attitudes in government which resort to using Europe as an ‘alibi’ (‘we cannot do this because of the EU’) or scapegoat (‘this damaging policy is not our responsibility, it was imposed upon us’). In view of

the 'contribution' of European integration to the making of post-war Italy (explored at the beginning of the chapter) and the ongoing impact on its economy, and considering how positively Italians have traditionally viewed the EU, the fact that, by 2018, Italians had become less 'European' than the average citizen of the EU member-states (p. 185) should be seen as a cause for serious concern.

The book concludes with an engaging chapter on Italy's quality of democracy. Pasquino taps into the literature on democratic quality, but at the same time avoids getting bogged down in the complexities of that debate, identifying, in a rigorous but parsimonious way, those key aspects which help us to understand the key characteristic, and deficiencies, of Italian democracy. His conclusion is that Italian democracy is not in crisis, rather 'it is a democracy of modest quality' (p.225), where the most important factor negatively affecting the quality is 'the overall lack of political accountability' (p. 219). As he cogently argues 'electoral accountability in the Italian case appears to be close to zero for parliamentarians' (p. 219) who are in the position of knowing that their re-selection does not depend on them serving the needs of their constituents. This is why the long cycle of electoral reform is not yet complete.

There are of course things that one would have wanted more of in this book. There is little or nothing on policy-making and policies (Easton's outputs). Political economy, and its importance to the governance of Italy, is largely absent. There is little on the international dimension of Italy's post-war development (beyond the EU). One would have liked to have seen more on the trade unions, and on the role of political corruption, since this was a cause of the momentous changes in the early 1990s which Pasquino successfully weaves into different chapters. And one finds little trace in the EU chapter of the debate about the 'Europeanisation' of the Italian polity. Some of the material presented here we have read before (it is a distillation in many ways). From a presentational perspective, it is not clear what purpose the 'boxes' serve. They appear to be a gesture towards what modern text books offer and their rather primitive and uninformative nature suggests that the

author would have been better resisting the idea. And, on a technical level, the publisher is not flattered for having missed the fact that the footnotes are out of synch with the text in Chapter 5.

Yet, at the same time, one recognises that inclusion of too much other content could make this book 'ragged', with a consequent dilution of the author's core institutional approach and message. And in any case, this should probably be seen less as a 'text book' (where it would be judged on its comprehensiveness, or lack of) than as a long (beautifully-crafted) 'essay'. What we have here is one of those texts that will be constantly turned and returned to by both those starting out in political science as well as more experienced scholars of Italian politics. Pasquino has done us an immense service in writing this book. *Grazie Professore.*

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