

Book Reviews

James L. Newell, *The Politics of Italy: Governance in a Normal Country*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. 416, pb £18.99, ISBN 978-05-21-60046-0; hb £55.00, ISBN 978-05-21-84070-5.

Before reviewing an ambitious and wide-ranging textbook devoted to the study of a whole political system, one should perhaps raise some general questions about the objectives and the usefulness of such a work. In this case, the question is the following: Is another comprehensive work about the politics of Italy today really needed, given that several volumes have been produced, having more or less similar aims, during the past couple of decades? This bulk of literature includes, among other titles, two interesting books written by the same author of the work here under review: *Parties and Democracy in Italy* (2000, Ashgate) and *Italian Politics: Adjustment under Duress* (2005, Polity Press, with Martin Bull).

In order to understand whether a new book represents a step forward in the attempt to analyse a given political system within a broader comparative framework, one has to establish, first, whether it gives us fresh and distinctive insights into the changes that have already taken place and those still on going, combining the analytical review of previous findings with parsimonious but effective descriptions of the current transformations. In other words, in order to be really beneficial, analyses concerning the politics of Italy today have to be incisive enough to convey the enormous complexity of the distinguishing features of the political system and, at the same time, they have to cover exhaustively another complexity: the large volume of controversial, and to an extent redundant information concerning the significance of the political changes that have taken place since the years of the crisis of the so called First Republic (1992-1994), and even the changes that were expected but have not happened in all this time. This is actually not an easy task, since many problems arise: What is the best research strategy to adopt in terms of the selection of topics? How much information is one to provide, in order to produce a readable and attractive text? What method of simplification and presentation of basic information concerning theoretical assumptions and historical backgrounds is one to adopt?

This book responds to such difficult challenges by examining the features and transformations of Italian politics in a straightforward way, placing this case study within a truly comparative framework and assessing the significance of clearly identified historical turning points. From this point of view, even a superficial look at James Newell's *The Politics of Italy* will convince the reader that the book is quite innovative from a methodological point of view and more than solid in terms of its substantive contents. Therefore, my answer to our preliminary question is: 'Yes, this is really a good attempt to provide a new comprehensive book on Italy'. Concerning the methodological issue, the main innovation is the explicit aim of introducing the reader to the basic concepts and approaches of comparative politics. Such a choice results in a quantity of accurate 'additional information': not only figures, tables, boxes and even pictures, but also a number of simple references linking the conceptual instruments of comparative politics to the disordered set of notions and matters at the core of Italian politics. Surely, this will be very much welcomed by students and teachers dealing with the analysis of contemporary Italy.

In terms of substantive issues, the main strategy of the book is to summarise the most important interpretations of the dynamic of the Italian political system, moving from a classic and simple threefold scheme based on the sides of the political triangle: polity, politics and policy. Readers are able to enter the Italian labyrinth by learning a lot about its historical and constitutional framework before approaching the topics of political culture and electoral behaviour. The final section is devoted to a more intensive analysis of a few selected policy processes and performances.

Finally, a distinctive feature of the volume is its extreme richness in terms of descriptive detail: the author lets the facts and the evidence talk, following a truly empirical line of reasoning and without showing ideological or theoretical biases. Following this road, he avoids falling into the trap of 'conventional views' of Italian politics. This is actually not very surprising, given that Prof. Newell is, by far, among the most influential of 'Italianists' around the globe and surely the most active in developing research enterprises directly grounded in Italy and involving Italian colleagues.

All in all, this book is a treasure for a wide range of readers. I really think it will be rather difficult to disagree. However, I will try to raise some points of criticism: the courageous decision to focus on the system level and, at the same time, to select some specific aspects of the political system to be intensively analysed is inevitably controversial and one has to consider the extent to which such a strategy can create cognitive 'holes' or leave some crucial variable aside. Three small points in particular should be noticed in this respect. Although I do not think that these criticisms undermine the overall value of the volume - or endanger the balanced, comprehensive and uncomplicated process of learning it makes possible - I will now

briefly discuss them, in order to make it possible to identify an ideal list of 'further readings and approaches' to be considered alongside this detailed introductory guide to the politics of Italy.

The first critical point is about the excessive emphasis on the transformation of Italian society, vis-à-vis the description of political change: although the first substantive section of the book focuses on the evolution of parliamentary government, on the recent changes in the institutional framework and on the every-day policy-making processes, most of the empirical presentation is centred on 'societal' or economic variables rather than political and institutional ones. Just to give a couple of examples, the detailed presentation of regional and municipal complexity in Italy (pp. 86 ff.) offers rich description of demographic and cultural diversities, while the political consequences of the complicated historical transformation of centre-periphery relations are less marked. At the same time, the basic features of judicial power in Italy – a hot issue in the political debate of the last twenty years – are less evidently described than other aspects like the critical events underlying such famous scandals as *Tangentopoli* or the question of conflicts of interest following the political rise of Silvio Berlusconi.

Secondly, a certain imbalance can be found in the contrast between the precision of a number of tables, boxes and figures concerning personages, features and historical events (for instance, historical and economic leaders, different theories about the interpretation of historical turning points in Italy, specific events like referendums or primary elections ...) on the one hand, and the description of 'classic' structural variables like government instability, the fragmentation of the party system(s), the North-South divide etc., on the other. It is true that the complexity of Italian historical and social organisation has to be explained to non-Italian readers, but it is also true that the amount of detail in a single book has to be parsimoniously controlled, even by a fruitful use of internet links and on-line databases. This last point opens the Pandora's box of internet-based infrastructures for political data and, in particular, the need for a standard bi-lingual dataset on Italian politics and society – a need that would be easily met by translating and publishing excellent existing records such as the appendices of the Istituto Cattaneo's *Italian Politics* yearbooks).

Finally, the appropriateness of the selection of policy sectors (economic policy, welfare and rights, and foreign policy) analysed in the last section of the book is debatable. A number of substantive areas of public action influenced by EU processes and policies (for example immigration, competitiveness and the environment) as well as other fundamental areas of public action dealing with the current challenges of a typically 'hollowed-out state' – for instance the recent period of 'permanent reform' of the State administration – are relatively neglected in this volume.

This in particular applies to the various events and attempts at reform paving the long road to Italian (quasi) federalism, which are considered in the central chapters of the book as far as their institutional features are concerned without an adequate analysis of their political implications for multi-level politics, the role of local chief executives, the growth of regional taxation, the proliferation of local and decentralised administrations and so forth.

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Giuseppe Ieraci, *Governments and Parties in Italy: Parliamentary Debates, Investiture Votes and Policy Positions (1994-2006)*, Leicester: Troubador Publishing, 2008, pb £17.95, pp. 133, ISBN 978-19-06-22172-0.

Notwithstanding the large number of works on Italian politics that emphasise the extent to which Italy's party system is polarised, transient, and fractionalised, there are few studies that aim at quantifying these characteristics by analysing inter- and intra-coalition conflicts. Giuseppe Ieraci's study is intended to fill in this gap. For this purpose, the contents of government and parliamentary leaders' speeches during debates over government investiture votes are analysed for the period covering 1994 to 2006. The data concern seven governments established during this period by the two main political coalitions, namely the centre-left Ulivo, which eventually became L'Unione, and the centre-right Casa delle Libertà.

Ieraci's study is divided into five chapters. Chapter I opens with an account of the changes that took place in the Italian party system and in policy-making following the 1993 electoral law reform. Ieraci argues that while the 1993 electoral law was ineffective in terms of curtailing party fractionalisation, or in other words, in reducing the number of competing political parties on the left-right spectrum, the features of the parliamentary arena, which allow each political party to 'reaffirm its identity', offer favourable ground for 'further opportunities of division and of conflict among the Italian parties' (p. 7).

Chapter 2 defines the main differences between the centre-left and the centre-right coalition governments' policy proposals by constructing a data set. The differences are reflected in the role of the free market and free competition (the centre left seeking to balance free market principles with social and redistributive policies); in their adherence to consensual forms of democracy (favoured by the centre left) or to majoritarian forms (favoured by the centre right); in their approach to federalism (the centre right being a stronger advocate of both federalism and devolution), and finally, in their foreign-policy orientations (the centre left being inclined towards

Europeanism with the centre right adhering more strongly to Atlanticism). The results presented in the chapter are firmly grounded in data and empirical research, which helps to establish each coalition's position on the basis of their articulated rhetoric rather than placing them in a taken-for-granted polarised political space dominated by pre-determined understandings of the left-right dichotomy.

Chapter 3 discusses how the major Italian parties taking part in coalition governments from 1994 to 2005 confronted each other in parliamentary debates over the investiture votes, by using another data set. As Ieraci himself acknowledges, the analysis faces two main short-comings: on the one hand, the content analysis is limited to the parties that were represented in Parliament; on the other hand the analysis is limited 'to the political themes mentioned by the official party speakers with regard to at least two different governments' (p. 43). Yet, it still offers an enlightening sketch of party positioning inside the Italian ideological families (left, centre, and right), which reveals that ideological positioning on the left-right dimension of the political spectrum continues to be important and that Italian political parties have 'difficulties in rallying coherently in two opposite coalitions' (p. 58).

Chapter 4 brings the data sets from the two previous chapters together in an attempt to 'integrate the two levels of analysis (government policy proposals and party responses to them)' (p. 59) and to reflect on coalition dynamics. The chapter provides valuable insights into how different coalition governments' policies were approached by various political parties in Parliament and how coalitions managed to survive in the face of inter-party tensions and policy incoherence. The results highlight that political parties may drift away from the original policy positions they had initially presented during their election campaigns if they see chances for themselves to claim offices, which according to Ieraci, are at least as important as policies for 'they are the main working tool to make policies reachable and sustainable' (p. 85).

In the fifth chapter, Ieraci draws the conclusion that even though contemporary Italian politics remains remarkably fractionalised and polarised, rendering Italy's democracy 'highly conflictual, incoherent and inefficient', the very same features also act as the engines ensuring its survival: fractionalisation prevents one single party from becoming hegemonic in the political system, and polarisation pushes parties to seek constantly to bargain and compromise in the parliamentary arena. Ieraci emphasises that the same dynamics also created a bi-polar party system lacking a central pole and marked by the dichotomy of the left- and the right-wing coalitions. However, in discussing polarisation and fractionalisation in current Italian politics he confines his attention to the part played by the features of the electoral and parliamentary systems in producing these trends. He does not quite touch upon the role and capacity

of party leaderships as a factor influencing the existence or absence of inter- and intra-party/coalition conflicts and confrontations even though he stresses that leaders had an impact in defining the patterns of Italian democracy. Integrating a discussion of the role of leadership into the parts that provide accounts of the political situation during each coalition formation could have shed more light on the analysis of party-government, inter-party and intra-party confrontation dynamics.

Overall, Ieraci's work is a valuable contribution to the literature on governments and parties in Italy, one that is likely to encourage further thinking and research in the field.

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Paolo Borruso, *Il PCI e l'Africa indipendente. Apogeo e crisi di un'utopia socialista (1956-1989)*, Florence: Le Monnier, 2009, pb € 22,40, pp. 302, ISBN 978-88-00-20928-1.

The history of the foreign policy of Italian parties is an interesting subject yet to be fully explored. *Il PCI e l'Africa indipendente* tries to fill this gap, in so far as it retraces the Italian Communist Party's (PCI) policy towards Africa between the years 1956 and 1989. This subject has not yet been systematically addressed by the literature and the book makes an original contribution to the analysis of the PCI's foreign policy. The party – and by extension other parties of the First Republic, such as the Christian Democrats (DC) and the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) – played a key role in shaping Italy's policy towards certain areas of the world, and especially the Third World. Therefore, the book is to be welcomed as a non-conventional contribution to the study of Italy's foreign policy.

The main thesis is that from the mid 1950s, the PCI developed a distinctive stance towards the Third World (including Africa) in an effort, on the one side, to develop for the party a new position towards the European community, and on the other to become gradually independent of the Soviet Union. While already sketched by Palmiro Togliatti's intuition concerning a 'national road to socialism', enunciated in 1956, the Third World policy of the PCI took on a definitive character during Enrico Berlinguer's time as party general secretary. It is against this ideological background that the author tries to explain the PCI's relations with Africa within a coherent yet multifaceted framework.

The analysis is developed by examining events that took place in three main areas (Algeria, the Portuguese-speaking countries of Africa, the Horn of Africa) which the author rightly identifies as those that attracted the greatest attention on the part of the PCI. The book is based on a wide

array of primary sources, including newspaper and magazine articles from *L'Unità* and *Rinascita*, official party documents such as the transcripts of meetings, and internal memos. The author does not quote any oral sources, and it would have been interesting to base the account also on interviews with the surviving actors at the centre of the PCI's African policy.

The book does not convincingly argue that the PCI elaborated an African policy as such, failing to explain why the PCI should have had an African policy in its own right at all. While the book traces the main events that underlay the relationship between the PCI and Africa, it fails to explain these episodes from the perspective of a coherent political vision referring specifically to Africa. For example, the book reconstructs in great detail the ambiguities and difficulties of the '*doppio appoggio*' (twin support) granted by the PCI to both the Derg regime and the underground Eritrean independence guerrillas. However, the author does not give any evidence that can throw light on whether the '*doppio appoggio*' was a deliberate choice on the part of the Commissione Esteri (Foreign Affairs Commission), or rather the almost fortuitous consequence of many uncoordinated interactions between different PCI members and the Ethiopian and Eritrean elites. The book is not clear in stating whether the PCI was conscious of its African policy or whether the author has derived the policy from the party's wider Third World policy.

The PCI granted to African countries ideological support, training of cadres, financial support ranging from grass-root initiatives to direct support to governments. At times it also engaged in intense diplomatic activity, supporting African causes both in Italy (as happened with the Portuguese-speaking liberation movements in the early 1970s) and in interaction with the socialist societies (as it was requested to do by Siad Barre in 1973). The book fails to differentiate between action in the two arenas or to provide an account of their different contributions.

The reconstruction of the PCI's African policy would have been helped by more precise descriptions of its protagonists. Dina Forti's long-standing relationship with Mozambique cannot be listed alongside Giuseppe D'Alema's single visit to Somalia in 1973. Equally, the lack of an explanation of each protagonist's role and position in the PCI at the time of his/her interaction with Africa weakens the general understanding. The involvement of Giancarlo Pajetta in the vicissitudes of the Horn in the late 1970s and 1980s can be read in another light if it is understood that Pajetta was at the time the Head of the PCI's Commissione Esteri.

Finally, the book would have benefited greatly from inclusion of a comparison with what other political forces were doing in Africa. Among Italian parties, the PCI was not alone in approaching liberation movements and newly independent governments in Africa: the PSI and the DC were also active in the continent and they often interacted with the PCI. The actions of other parties are not mentioned in the book but had they been,

they would have helped the reader to understand the role of the PCI's African policy in shaping Italy's African policy, and the role political parties played in structuring the country's foreign policy generally.

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Bruno Mascitelli, Rory Steele and Simone Battiston, *Diaspora Parliaments: How Australia faced the Italian challenge*, Ballan Victoria: Connor Court Publishing, 2010, pb AUS\$39.95, pp. 392, ISBN 978-19-21-42188-4.

In this book, Bruno Mascitelli, Rory Steele and Simone Battiston focus on some of the most intricate and delicate issues linked to expatriates' rights to vote - where these affect international affairs and policy-making, multiculturalism and political representation as well as national identity and citizenship in both sending and receiving countries.

The authors base their analysis on a selection of documents, many previously unavailable and even classified - obtained under the 1982 Freedom of Information Act - and on interviews with diplomatic and government officials. These sources enable the authors to discuss the constant and indefatigable exchanges between the Italian and the Australian governments - exchanges which, having started timidly in the late 1980s, led up to the 2006 vote of the Italian expatriate community in Australia.

The main questions addressed by the authors - Rory Steele having been directly involved in the diplomatic exchanges of 1996 - 2001 as Australia's ambassador to Italy - are: why did the Australian government feel that granting 'extra-territorial' voting rights to the Australian-Italian community would pose a challenge for it? And how did the government confront this challenge, develop its policy and review its soundness?

The book also analyses and clarifies other interesting issues, among which: the influence of the Australian government's views on the process that led to the formation of local COMITES (Committee of Italians Abroad, created through a bill in 1985) and the painstaking and thorough policy review process undertaken by the Australian Inter-Departmental Committee, which for several years comprehensively analysed all documents arriving from Italy.

Through the support of the Freedom of Information files and the words of some of the diplomats and government representatives who took part in the process, the book is organised around themes that include: Australia's migration policies; the issue of expatriate voting; how Australia faced the Italian challenge. Interestingly, by analysing both the Italian and the Australian political contexts and the doubts and hopes of the

stakeholders on both sides, the book focuses on the development of the process that led to the approval of the Italian expatriate vote in Australia.

The issues linked to the right of expatriates to vote for the Italian parliament – and to be represented within it – started raising some serious questions fairly recently, that is, when improved communication technologies and more affordable flights allowed the transformation of *migrant* individuals into *transnational* ones, so undermining traditional notions of national identity, citizenship and socio-political allegiance.

At the same time, on a supra-individual level, as soon as governments realised that citizens living beyond the borders of their jurisdiction represented potentially valuable assets in economic and political arenas, and as soon as they started dealing with long-neglected matters, such as their rights (and duties) as nationals, the notion of the existence of ‘closed’ homeland and diaspora communities was also challenged.

The Australian government had no strong objections to the enfranchisement of Italian migrants as a matter of principle. In practice, allowing Italian nationals and individuals holding dual (Italian and Australian) citizenship to vote for the election of twelve Deputies and six Senators drawn from a wide Overseas Constituency, posed some serious political and diplomatic issues. These included the freedom of Italy to apply the new voting system without a) infringing Australian sovereignty, b) creating factional divisions through political campaigns within the diaspora community, and c) damaging bilateral relations, especially if overseas political representatives were required to choose the Italian side on non-neutral issues. Therefore, ‘this for Australia was essentially a domestic issue’ (p. 82).

Another reason for the seriousness of the requests coming from the Italian government was the fact that Italian-born residents formed the third largest community in Australia – after the British and the New Zealanders. For the Australian government, allowing flexibility on voting and political matters for Italian-born residents (and many of their Australian-born children), would have set a dangerous precedent which would have led to similar requests from other countries.

However, this was not the only issue. The delicate nature of the question became even more evident only after 2002, when the Citizenship Legislation Amendment Bill was passed. The Bill allowed individuals taking up Australian citizenship to retain their prior nationality so benefitting from dual citizenship; and, as correctly stated by the authors, dual citizenship represents ‘a sensitive matter in both domestic and international politics [as] it touches the raw nerves of loyalty, sovereignty and national responsibilities’ (p. 33).

It is clear that due to the increasing number of countries enfranchising citizens living abroad, the issue of expatriate votes is

destined to become more and more prominent. Future developments will certainly involve other countries tending to grant expatriate voting rights. However, this is an issue requiring extensive interdisciplinary investigation as, in transnational contexts, national and political identities are complex, multi-layered and, often, coexisting.

The interviews with government and diplomatic officials provide a more personal, behind-the-scenes, perspective which aptly clarifies and humanises the detached character of the formal exchanges on headed and stamped paper between government officials. The private element of exchanges on such a bureaucratic issue can also be found in the notes, comments and instructions pencilled by various individuals in the margins of some of these papers.

The valuable documentary material, the testimonies of the individuals directly involved in the process that led to the enfranchisement of the Italo-Australian community, and the analysis of the domestic and foreign policy of both Italy and Australia over the past one hundred years, render *Diaspora Parliaments* a valuable research tool for all those involved in the study of expatriate voting systems and the socio-political allegiances of individuals with dual or multiple citizenship.

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