

The study of change and institutional persistence in ‘Rivoluzioni e Burocrazie’ by Pietro Grilli di Cortona

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Professor Pietro Grilli di Cortona passed away on 16 July 2015, but for all those who had the good fortune to work alongside him, as I did, his rigorous and independent thinking, his generous, measured academic style, and the warm, gracious way in which he unfailingly engaged with others represent an immense legacy. We first met in 2002, the year in which Grilli asked me to take on some temporary teaching in Public Administration at the Roma Tre University. I accepted his invitation with great pleasure, and it marked the beginning of a relationship of reciprocal understanding, which matured above all from 2007, following my transfer from the University of Calabria to the Faculty of Political Science at Roma Tre. At the time, Grilli was director of the Department of International Studies, and his scientific and academic prowess, combined with his teaching skills and human qualities, were apparent to me from the very start. So it is an honour for me, on this occasion, to look back on one of his many scientific contributions, which have enriched political science in Italy and further afield. The work in question is *Rivoluzioni e burocrazie. Continuità e mutamento negli Stati rivoluzionari* (Grilli di Cortona 1991), which perfectly reflects an intellectual passion for studying and understanding phenomena of crisis and regime change that would distinguish his entire output.

The book focuses on a number of important questions concerning the role of revolutionary processes in relation to the bureaucracies of the old and the new regime. They are dealt with by investigating the relationship between revolutions and bureaucracies in a number of countries where a revolutionary process took place in the course of the twentieth century: the communist revolutions of Russia and China, and the Nazi one in Germany – the so-called “great revolutions”, together with the political, economic and cultural repercussions they had in Europe and Asia – and the four “small revolutions” of Algeria, Cuba, Iran and Nicaragua. The Algerian revolution was anticolonial in inspiration, the ones in Cuba and Nicaragua combined anti-Western sentiment and a longing for national liberation with elements of social freedom and renewal, while in Iran religion was the key factor in revolutionary mobilization. The seven revolutionary processes were marked by profound differences, which impacted on the institutional outcomes of the revolutions.

The first step in Grilli’s research is to define *revolution*. A recent disciplinary work (Calise, Lowi, Musella 2016) proposes two analytic dimensions for the study of this concept: the outcome of the change (political/social) generated by the revolutionary process

and the type of change (greater openness/closure of the system) that results (Paparo 2016). In the first dimension a distinction is made between *political* revolutions, which simply transform the political organization of a State, and social revolutions, which overthrow both the political and social organization and entail a broader and deeper change. The second dimension takes into account the direction of change, and distinguishes between *liberal* and *authoritarian/totalitarian* revolutions: in the first case, civil liberties and political rights are recognized, and the revolutionary process sets out to establish a polyarchic regime (Dahl 1972); conversely, in the second case dissent and competition are strongly limited (authoritarian regimes), if not totally suppressed and replaced by an absence of political pluralism and by the high mobilization and ideological penetration of society (totalitarian regimes).

This framework helps to make it clear that Grilli chose to focus on revolutions that led to authoritarianisms and totalitarianisms – the former capable of overthrowing the political order, the latter of sweeping away the social one as well. After signalling 1789 as a decisive watershed in establishing the more recent meaning of the term, he writes: “I consider revolutions to be those processes that entail, on the one hand, the crumbling and fall of a political regime and its juridical order, *by internal means, in illegitimate and violent forms* and through phenomena of mass mobilization; and on the other, *the establishment of a new juridical political regime*” (Grilli di Cortona 1991, 20). It is with this meaning, comprising both a “revolutionary situation” and a “revolutionary outcome” – which assimilates the lesson of Fisichella (1987) but looks also to the contribution of Huntington (1968) – that the three fundamental components of any revolution emerge: the process of discontinuous transition from one regime to another, political mobilization and the presence of violence. Grilli’s comparative analysis of revolutionary bureaucracies goes on to examine these dimensions, given his stated aim to “formulate generalizations about the relations between, on the one hand, the nature of revolutionary change, the characteristics of political mobilization and the type and amount of violence produced; and, on the other, the qualitative and quantitative features of the bureaucracies that emerge (and/or partially survive) in the revolution” (Grilli di Cortona 1991, 29). The research thus looks at revolutions from the point of view of their effects on state administrative institutions, and the second phase of the research involves framing the revolutionary phenomenon in the ambit of the modern State.

The development of legal-rational bureaucratic apparatuses is the principal element in the formation of the modern State (Weber 1922). Precisely because they are constitutive of state power (Poggi 1978), administrative structures are so indispensable that it seems hard for them to be attacked by revolutionary processes. The analysis of individual cases begins at this point, exploiting data drawn from history to reconstruct the changes undergone by military and civil bureaucracies following their impact with revolution. So, for instance, the transition from the Russian bureaucracy to the Soviet one displays elements of both discontinuity and continuity. The former includes quantitative and qualitative differences in the recruitment base, a party apparatus parallel to the state apparatus and predominant over it, and a distinguishing between civilian and military roles. Elements of administrative continuity between Tsarism and communism include entrenched inequalities within apparatuses, high administrative centralization and strong State involvement in running the economy. In China, in the switch-over from the imperial mandarin state to

the communist administration, a fundamental contribution was made by the USSR and the Chinese Red Army. The break with the past was profound: the new communist officials came from previously excluded social orders; mobilization was intense and frequent changes were made in the administration; every level of the administration was subordinate to the power of the Chinese Communist Party; and there was a big expansion of the bureaucracy. In this case too, however, it is possible to discern elements of continuity, such as the strong centralization of power, the close link between the armed forces and the masses, and even the system of reciprocal surveillance and the educational practices of the old regime, onto which the communists grafted their own indoctrination and re-education programmes.

In Hitler's regime as well, the transformation of the State was accompanied by the retaining of certain structures and procedures, which would curb the processes of internal Nazification, in turn hindered by war abroad and by the fear that the professional capabilities of the bureaucracies might be negatively affected by excessive politicization and ideologization. In all three of the cases included in the "great revolutions" category, the revolutionary process played on the weakness of the old political set-up: Russia was fighting the Crimean War; China saw the collapse of its empire in 1911; and Germany, from 1918 onwards, experienced a climate of civil war. Moving on to the four countries exemplifying the "small revolutions", Grilli notes that in Third World nations "not all revolutions are Communist"; he also observes that there are differences in the revolutionary outcomes, but: "while it is true that States and their bureaucracies are the main target of revolutionary movements, it is also true that the latter subsequently make use of state and bureaucratic structures to complete change, consolidate results and protect their power (Grilli di Cortona 1991, 179-180).

It is with history and comparative analysis, his favourite methodological choices, that Grilli sheds light on a further key feature of change: it does not occur in a *vacuum*, nor is it totally unanchored from a pre-existing set-up. As a clear demonstration of his enduring interest in phenomena of political transformation, exactly twenty years later he wrote that "no form of change takes place on a *tabula rasa*, and no attempt to understand its real scale and causes can ignore the role played by the past, which expresses itself in different shapes and forms: by creating obstacles for, slowing down and rendering more fraught the change itself, and by conditioning and channelling change in certain directions. Tackling 'heritage' therefore means, at least to some extent, 'obscuring' and downplaying the role and implications of great changes" (Grilli di Cortona 2011, 11). He is constantly urging us to attend to the past and its institutions, even when events acquire a profoundly innovative and discontinuous dimension, as in the case of revolutions.

The discussion of the results, above all ones relating to differences in revolutionary outcomes, is dealt with in the final chapter of the book, which offers a synthesis and a comparative analysis of the impact of revolutions on bureaucracies in the countries considered. They range in time from 1917 to 1980, and take in various continents. First of all, he surveys the shared dimensions of revolutionary change: the change of the élites and the upward mobility of previously excluded groups and classes; the transformation of the public apparatus and the possibly central role of the single party; political mobilization and the politicization of society; the growth of state interventionism and of bureaucratic personnel. Secondly, he singles out strands of continuity with the pre-revolutionary set-up.

Generally, their impact becomes apparent over the long term, not in the period of the revolutionary crisis. They consist of things like the persistence of cultural and structural models, the emulation of the administrative organization of the ex-colonizing nation, processes of modernization put in motion before the revolution, the conditions of development of the old bureaucracy and the degree of violence of the revolutionary process. Finally, with regard to the different effects of revolutions on bureaucracies, four factors seem to require consideration: the role of ideology, the structure of the revolutionary army, the type of leadership (charismatic or otherwise) and the presence in society of institutions capable of curbing the revolutionary drive (for instance, the Catholic Church in the case of Nicaragua).

Grilli concludes that “the more totalitarian political power is, the more bureaucracy will be subject to that power, and that there is no rigid relationship between revolutions and the growth of bureaucratic powers. Indeed, the majority of cases considered here show, besides a quantitative development (...) of state administrations, a reduction in the autonomy of the post-revolutionary bureaucracies” (Grilli di Cortona 1991, 217). The lack of autonomy of state institutions is all the greater where a very strong role is played by ideology. The reclassification of the cases at the end of the book identifies Russia, Germany, China and Iran as analogous cases, where the single party is articulated as a parallel bureaucracy, besides being the principal decision-making actor; in the case of the Iranian regime, there is also the supreme authority of the religious leader over the entire state apparatus, the single party and the revolutionary militias.

It seems possible to say, then, that these conclusions are closely bound up with the reflections on power and on the structures of political authority and their degree of institutionalization. This is a crucial theme in politics and political science: institutions are fundamental for converting power into political authority, supported by legitimation and autonomous from the control of the resources pertaining to social actors (Ieraci 2003; 2015). Pietro Grilli dedicated his working life as a political scientist to studying regime crises and changes, and to processes of democratization, in the awareness that understanding the actors, processes and structures of power and political authority is fundamental in keeping at bay, as far as possible, the risks and dangers facing democracy, that most extraordinary of human inventions.

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