

Parties and party systems in Pietro Grilli di Cortona's research

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Parties and party systems, intended as key democratic institutions, represented a central subject in Pietro Grilli di Cortona's research. His focus on these topics has been rich, innovative and continuous during all his career. His approach to the study of political parties and party systems has always been comparative, with a great relevance given to their historical evolution and the connections with the cleavages structures present in European societies.

Although Pietro's contribution to the study of parties and party systems has mainly been framed within a more general research stream on the processes of democratization, he has also given a broader contribution to the explanation of the transformations currently affecting the main European countries. In this brief note we will try to trace the key features and steps of Pietro's work in this field.

In *Da uno a molti. Democratizzazione e rinascita dei partiti in Europa orientale* [From One to Many. Democratization and Rebirth of Parties in Eastern Europe] (Grilli 1997), Pietro focuses on the rebirth of democracy and multi-party politics in Central and Eastern European countries.

The book's aim is twofold: on the one hand, to retrace the shift from a monoparty to a multiparty system during the transition occurred from 1989 to the first half of the 1990s; on the other, to identify all the causal factors affecting each analyzed case's (Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia – Czech Republic and Slovakia since 1993 – Poland, Romania and Hungary) own evolution and development. After describing the specific transitions from Communism to democracy with regard to each selected case, the focus is then shifted to a thorough analysis on how each party system has been changing accordingly. The main explaining factors for the variance that can be observed across the national cases taken into account are identified with the cleavages inherent the party system's birth/rebirth and with the different ways in which the democratic transition has taken place. The in-depth analysis regarding the historical roots of the conflicts that had generated the party alignments as they appeared before the spread of Communism makes it possible to analyze them and their main features, and to outline continuities and discontinuities between the former party systems and the ones originating from Communism. Three degrees of

* This text describes briefly the main points of my on-going research on Italian MPs elected abroad: reconstruction of Italian deputation profile and the kind of representation enjoyed by Italian migrants.

continuity/discontinuity are thus delineated, respectively related to the party families, to the cleavage systems and to the single parties.

Pietro's analysis shows that, whereas a certain degree of continuity may be found with respect to party families, relevant discontinuities are to be traced as for the single party units and, above all, for the cleavages. Particularly, his findings on the changes affecting cleavages are worth mentioning, since, according to Pietro's analysis, Eastern European countries present a new and different cleavage structure. The first socio-political conflict, crucial during the democratic transitions, is related to the struggles between innovators and democracy supporters on the one hand, and conservatives only moderately inclined toward the democratic transition, on the other. The second cleavage, which gains more relevance after the transition, is related to the conflict between "libertarians" pro-market and "authoritarians" anti-market. Finally, the last cleavage that became relevant in Eastern Europe is centred on the conflicts among nationalities, since consistent ethnic minorities are present in almost all Eastern European countries. With regard to the cleavages originally elaborated by Rokkan, in his analysis Pietro demonstrates that the class cleavage disappears, being only in part incorporated by the pro/anti-market conflict. Moreover, the urban/rural and state/church cleavages have been decisively weakened by the consequences of fifty years of communism, being to some extent relevant only in a few cases.

The focus on the Eastern European countries, to which Pietro devoted a constant attention during all his career, led him to focus on the subject of nationalism which, as mentioned above, represented one of the most interesting phenomena emerging from the previous research. In *Stati, nazioni e nazionalismi in Europa* [States, Nations and Nationalisms in Europe] (Grilli 2003), he focuses on the phenomenon of nationalism in both Western and Eastern European countries, devoting a special attention to the nationalist parties and their impact on party systems. According to Pietro, there are four possible types of relationship between nationalism and political parties. The first is *indifference*: the nationalist cleavage is not dominant and does not lead to the formation of a nationalist party; in fact, the party system is structured by other cleavages. Secondly, *confluence* represents the case where the nationalist cleavage is more relevant, though still insufficient to favour the emergence of a nationalist party; parties originating from different cleavages incorporate the nationalist issue in their own political programmes. Thirdly, there can be a *sectionalisation*, that is the development of a party system at the sub-national instead of the state level, as it happened in the Belgian case where a duplication of the party system in the francophone and Flemish regions occurred. Finally, the presence of a nationalist party generated directly by the ethno-territorial cleavage constitutes a case of *direct expression*.

In this last scenario, Pietro identifies three types of nationalist parties: a) ethno-nationalist parties, representing the interests of an ethnic (or ethno-linguistic) group which can be either dispersed in the state territory or concentrated in one specific region and whose members share a common identity (history, religion, language); b) regionalist parties which represent the interests of a specific region, where the sense of belonging to a territory is more relevant than any other ethnic tie; c) populist and xenophobic parties, whose key issue is a high degree of intolerance towards immigrants, external groups and any other national minorities. With regard to the last type, Pietro clarifies that it is not

always possible to consider populist parties as true nationalist parties. In terms of impact on party systems, Pietro identifies the cases where nationalist parties are concentrated in a specific region as the ones with more chances to become relevant at the systemic level.

There can be a situation, which Pietro calls *hegemony*, where a single nationalist party is able to monopolize the vote of the entire ethnic group: in this case, there will be a clear distinction between the party system at the state and local levels. A second situation, defined *fragmentation*, refers to cases where more than one nationalist party tries to represent the interests of the dominant ethnic group in a specific region: as in the previous case, there will be a party system at the local level clearly distinct from the one at the state level, but in this case the competition among nationalist parties will weaken the chances to reach their goals. Finally, in the third situation, nationalist parties may represent a *minority* in the region, limiting the differences between party systems at the local and national levels.

Pietro's interest towards parties and party systems has focused on the Italian case as well. In his book *Il cambiamento politico in Italia* [The Political Change in Italy] (Grilli 2007), focused on the two big transitions affecting the Italian democratic experience (the first of *genus*, from fascism to democracy, the second of *species*, from the First to the so called 'Second Republic'), he provides for key arguments on the role of parties and of party systems in the change and transformation of the Italian political system, keeping an eye on the compared dimension. Moving from evidence already emerged from previous studies on the Italian case (Morlino 1998, 2006), Pietro identifies parties as the main causal link between the first and the second transition. Formerly, they are the main structures of the democratic consolidation following the first transition, but then, by expanding their role in the society, they get to "occupy" social and economic sectors and thus limit the role of other collective actors.

Parties' intrusiveness, associated to the decision-making deficit which was due to the lack of political turnover and to an irresponsible competition (Sartori 1982), contributes to a generalized crisis, that will last all over the First Republic (Cotta and Isernia 1996). Nonetheless, it is in the very party system that the new transition towards the Second Republic is going to take its roots. According to Pietro, the electoral earthquake and the party system's break-up, occurring after the mid 1990s' crisis (Cotta 1996) are the most notable outcomes of an ongoing transformation and the key explaining variables for a transition for a brand new political system, different from the previous one but whose results, however, are still hard to be clearly identified.

Pietro selects parties and party systems as one of the key dimensions also within his compared research on the role of the legacy in European countries' processes of democratization, published in the book, co-edited with Orazio Lanza, *Tra vecchio e nuovo regime. Il peso del passato nella costruzione della democrazia* [Between old and new regime. The weight of the past in democracy building] (Grilli and Lanza 2011). It is in the very parties that such legacies may have a stronger impact.

In particular, the attention is focused on former ruling parties or "successor" parties and their fate after the democratic transition: do they survive? If so, what is their degree of capacity of adaptation? How much relevance are they able to obtain? The analysis of some of the most relevant European cases show a consistent variance of outcomes (Grilli 2011a; 2011b). For example, in the German case the former ruling party disappears after World

War II due to the strategies implemented by both the occupying forces and the national democratic elite. Pietro underlines also that successor parties may hand down legacies even if they disappear or become marginal at the systemic level: in the Italian case, for instance, the mass party model introduced by the National Fascist Party is adopted by the main Italian political parties after the transition. In post-communist countries, the former ruling parties survive the transition and became relevant actors of the new regime. According to Pietro, the survival and success of the ruling party after the regime change is largely due to its capacity to maintain and exploit the resources controlled before the transition.

In this regard, the more continuous and peaceful was the transition the more the former ruling parties have been able to keep direct control over the crucial resources. Former ruling parties may constitute both positive and negative legacies for successor democracies. Pietro underlines how these outcomes are largely influenced by the strength of former ruling parties before the transition and the degree of genuineness of their conversion to democracy after the regime change. Hence, former ruling parties are more likely to represent a negative legacy for successor democracies when they have not entirely rejected the communist ideology or become nationalist parties (Slovakia, Romania). In cases like Poland the former ruling party's genuine conversion to democracy represented a positive legacy for the democratic consolidation.

Nonetheless, as said before, Pietro's interest towards parties and party systems is not only framed within the broader research area of democratization: an in-depth review of the various changes affecting them in the European experience can be read in the book, co-edited with Gianfranco Pasquino, *Partiti e sistemi di partito nelle democrazie europee* (Grilli and Pasquino 2007). Here Pietro draws the conclusions of a comparative research on the state and evolution of parties and party systems in eight countries representative of Central (Great Britain, France, Germany), Southern (Spain, Portugal), Northern (Sweden) and Eastern Europe (Poland, Russia). For instance, according to Pietro, despite the many signs of crisis the thesis of a party decline cannot be confirmed; on the contrary, political parties remain crucial players of every democratic regime, yet with changing roles and functions. Moreover, the thesis of a strong connection between political parties and social cleavages seems to be confirmed: while they may emerge also thanks to the role played by political entrepreneurs, their institutionalization and survival in the long run need an anchoring with interests and groups coming from civil societies.

With regard to party systems, a different evolution between "old" and "new" systems can be detected. In the former, a "de-freezing" process led bipolar systems to be increasingly threatened by third poles in United Kingdom, France and Germany around anti-immigration and anti-Europe issues, as well as localist and regionalist tendencies, also present in Spain. In the latter, the tendency until the first part of 2000s was the opposite, with systems consolidating centripetal, bipolar tendencies, with a decreasing ideological polarization (Portugal, Spain, Poland). Hence, empirical evidence supports the thesis of a decreasing relevance of Sartori's polarized pluralism (Sartori 1976; 1982), while the moderate pluralism type became widespread. However, the former type did not become useless at all. According to Pietro, polarized pluralism may return to be a diffuse type of party system in Europe if the degree of ideological polarization and the support for anti-system

parties raise again, a prophecy confirmed by recent developments in most of the European countries and even more so outside Europe.

The frame so far depicted inevitably sketches only a partial and incomplete outline of the rich and various legacy that every work by Pietro represents to political science, made of a lucid analysis and of an objective capacity to easily interpret and explain phenomena of no simplicity at all. His untimely death not only deprived us of a careful and generous *Maestro*, but first and foremost of a dear Friend we will miss, now and forever.

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