

LEGACY AND PRESENT SITUATION OF THE ITALIAN POLITICAL CULTURE

Tibor SZABÓ¹

After about 150 years from the unification of Italy, today there are many problems about the Italian identity. In Norberto Bobbio's opinion the luck of a very unified Italian identity is due to the luck of an organic civil society. Bobbio was repeated before his death in the last nineties of the last century the same idea than Massimo D'Azeglio in the Eighteen century, just after the Italian Unity, that's: "Italy is made, now we must create the Italians". Bobbio was convinced that the division in Italian culture is so great that it is able to provoke huge separations between the members and the fans of Italian political parties. He writes: "L'Italia è stata fatta, ma l'interrogativo è se siano stati fatti gli Italiani. La Lega è la dimostrazione di questo problema aperto: per essa esistono i piemontesi, i lombardi, i veneti, ma non gli italiani".² In that way we couldn't speak about an integral political culture either.

In an article of the *Corriere della Sera*, the well-known Italian scientist of the political identity, Ernesto Galli della Loggia wrote (*Politica senza cultura*) that after the breakdown of the Italian party system in 1992 due to the so-called „*tangentopoli*”, that means the emergence of a total corruption network in the whole political system, the institution of every political culture were destroyed.³ These institutions like Istituto Gramsci or the Treccani Encyclopaedia, Mondoperaio etcetera, have lost their importance for the development and the Italian political and civic culture.

He argues that:

¹ University of Szeged.

² Bobbio, Norberto, *L'Italia è stata fatta, siamo sicuri che si siano gli italiani?*, *Corriere della Sera*, 1994, p. 2.

³ Galli della Loggia, Ernesto, *Una politica senza cultura*, *Corriere della Sera*, 9 August, 2009, p. 1.

Nations are complex things. The basic material for constructing them is furnished mainly by history. But the people who bring them to life by giving them ideals and the form of a state are neither individuals nor the masses: they are the political classes. If the comatose state in which the celebrations of the 150th anniversary of Italy's unity are currently languishing means anything, then it is that unity, which ultimately means Italy itself, all in all seems irrelevant to the politicians of this country, both the Right and the Left. ... The vast majority of Italians know [however] how things are: they know that in the last century and a half there has been no instrument that contributed as much to their freedom, their material progress and the emergence of their civic conscience as the unified state that is called Italy.

Also Giovanni Sartori is convinced that currently there are many threats to Italian identity and Italian civil society which should be capable or influencing the Italian political culture. His recent book, "Il Sultanato" (The Sultanate), focuses on Berlusconi's leadership style. In this book "The Sultanate" he describe Berlusconi as behaving like a sultan.⁴ He is often described by his detractors as having dictatorial tendencies, but why does he specifically use the analogy of a sultan?

Do these problems of contemporary Italian politics have an antecedent in the Italian history and political life? We think that it does. In my opinion, in Italian history and political life there is a significant continuity. More of the present problems have origins in the Italian past. Analysing electoral comportment Piero Ignazi for exemple writes that today's voters from different parties follow the same pattern like eighty years before. "L'Italia elettorale del 1919 riemerge immutata negli anni ,40...i partiti che entrano nel primo parlamento della repubblica eletto il 18 aprile 1948 rimangono in vita, con la sola eccezione dei monarchici, fino agli anni ,90...ma ancora alle elezioni del 1992 la staticità del sistema politico è impressionante: gli otto partiti tradizionali (dalla Dc al Pr) sono ancora tutti presenti..."⁵

We think that there is a bigger continuity concerning political and civic culture in the Italian political thought and practice. In the present political life we could find the three level and type of political and civic cultures mentioned by Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba in their book published in 1963, entited *Civic culture*. It is one of the peculiarities of the contemporary Italian political culture that —with more or less discrepancies— we could find either parochial, subject and participant civic culture. The reason

⁴ Sartori, Giovanni, *Il Sultanato*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2009.

⁵ Ignazi, Piero, *I partiti italiani*, Bologna, 1997, p. 13.

is that—in spite of the important changes in the surface—the continuity in the Italian political attitude is very very strong. We remember the significant phrase (became a maxim in Italy) of the prince Salina in the novel of the Nobel Prize Italian author Giuseppe Tommasi di Lampedusa, that “everything must change if we want everything to remain like now”. The mentality of the prince Salina is very typical for the Italian moral attitude.

We think that civic or political culture is interconnected with the moral behavior of a nation. The moral attitude of a people belongs to the whole legacy of the nation. The moral is a complex system of traditionally accepted values from time to time renewed. In Italy the connection of moral values and politics has always been a central problem since the Renaissance age.⁶ The civic culture and political participation depends on how, and in which matter people of a nation would like to express their wills. In this case there are almost two big tendencies in the Italian political tradition having influence also today in Italian political life.

One is originated from Niccolò Machiavelli's conception who separated moral values and politics. The prince is autonomous and must consider the opposition. If there is an opportunity, he could use—without any regards to the moral or political consequence—violence for realize a goal. The separation of moral values and politics has had many followers in politics. The attitude of a prince influenced and determined the ambience and the whole atmosphere of the political class not only in the past but only in the “brief Twentieth Century” (Eric J. Hobsbaum). One of the followers of this point of view in the last century was—in our opinion—the leader of the National-fascist Party, Benito Mussolini. But he personalized only one side of the machiavellian politics: those of the violence, or saying with Machiavelli's terminology: the “politics of the lion”. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli says that the Prince “must know there are two ways of contesting, the one by the law, the other by force, ...but because the first is frequently not sufficient, it is necessary to have recourse to the second. Therefore it is necessary for a prince to understand how to avail himself of the beast and the man”.⁷ So, “a prince ought to choose the fox and the lion...”. The force is not enough to govern an entire society, it is necessary to use both lion and fox to have consent of the people. So, fascist political culture is close to the politics of the

⁶ See Nauert, Charles G., *Humanism and the Culture of Renaissance Europe*, Cambridge University Press, 2006.

⁷ Machiavelli, Niccolò, *The Prince*, translated by George Bull, Penguin Paperback, chapter XVIII, 2003.

lion. An other political principle and practice in Italy was (and today *is*) the politics of fox. In democratic circumstances many politicians serve this way to have hegemony in the society and we can see the realization of a combination of lion and fox. During the after the 2nd World War period, in Italy the complex use and abuse of law and the politics of compromise of the Democratic and Socialist party to conserve the power has led Italy to a political situation of corruption. One of the emblematic figures of this period was Bettino Craxi, head of the Italian Socialist Party from 1976 to 1993. From this situation emerges a totally new political figure, Silvio Berlusconi.⁸

The other conception says that moral and politics (and political culture, too) are in a close relationship each other. The main theoretician of this tendency was one of the adversaries of Mussolini: the liberal philosopher Benedetto Croce of Naples. In his work *The Elements of Politics* writes that the essence of the state is basically ethics. It means that the aim of a state must to be the realization of political and —first of all— moral ideals and concepts. Moral and ethic values are not separable from the purposes of a ruling class in the state. Croce states that “lo spirito etico ha nella politica la premessa della sua attività e insieme il suo strumento”.⁹ The Italian political thinker cannot accept, even reject the “politics of amorality”. So, he considers history from this point of view and he speaks about “ethical-political history”. Analysing Croce’s conception, Antonio Gramsci tries to describe society like a combination of “ethical-political system” and the economic form.¹⁰ Both Croce and Gramsci consider a task of state institutions create a political culture. In that way, also Norberto Bobbio defends moral and human values, first of all liberty and justice capable or supporting politics and state. An other Italian scholar, Costantino Marco says that of its own formal democracy and political pluralism is not enough the realize liberty. It is necessary to construct a “common ethics” unifying the diverse attitude in the society to form a relatively similar national identity. In a concrete historical circumstance the combination of moral and politics values to create a new political culture is very difficult because attitudes of the political actors depend in a major part on the everyday routine. The role of habit and custom is very important in the choice of political culture. We can get used to com-

⁸ On the history of Italian politics and history of the 20th century, see: Colarizi, Simona, *Storia del Novecento italiano*, Milano, BUR, 2000.

⁹ Croce, Benedetto, *Elementi di politica*, Bari, Laterza, 1925, p. 28.

¹⁰ See Szabó, Tibor, *Gramsci politikai filozófiája* (Political Philosophy of Gramsci), Szeged, Szegedi Lukács kör 1991.

promises in a positive (or negative) sense, observe the laws of the democratic game, but also somebody can evade the laws or ignore the common good.

Well, in Italy, we can observe the existence of very diverse political and moral cultures and attitudes. In spite of this diversities there are some characteristics of the political culture: the transformism, the so-called familism, and clientelism.

The *transformism* is—in Gianfranco Pasquino's view—the more original contribution to the Italian political system: “il contributo più originale, più significato e più duraturo dato dal parlamentarismo italiano”.¹¹ The transformism has his origins in the Agostino Depretis's politics, prime minister from 1876. This political practice would mean that prime minister must overcome right – left division to win votes, assisted by deputies of diverse parties. For this to work, the prime minister gives facilities to deputies who are able to join him and leave his original party. In this way, a deputy could pass from a parliamentary group or even from a coalition to an other without any problems.

The *familism*, the attachment to the family is a very important fact to consider in Italian political culture. We can find the roots of this phenomena in the past perfect, in the Italian political and social traditions. In Paul Ginsborg's view the familism “è un rapporto specifico fra famiglia, società civile e Stato, nel cui quadro i valori e gli interessi della famiglia sono contrapposti agli altri momenti principali della convivenza umana”.¹² The familism is important in Italy because of the weakness and incapacity of the state. So people—like Almond and Verba—have no confidence in the state's capacity to resolve the social and political problems of the nation. The civic culture is not unified and strong in Italy—in Almond and Verba's book *Civic culture*—because in Italy there is an “alienated political culture with low sense of confidence and competence”. In this way the political values and coherence of an Italian family are highly valued.

The *clientelism* has also an old tradition principally in the southern part of the peninsula, in the *Mezzogiorno*. The notions of “client – patron” appear in the Italian history very often favouring and facilitating relations not always legal, but illegal with a real chain of “raccomandations”, “friendship” or “favours”. This method of action influences to give and to transmit informations and public money from one person to an other. This phenomenon be

¹¹ Pasquino, Gianfranco, *Transizione a parole*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2000, p. 209.

¹² Ginsborg, Paul, “Familismo”, in Ginsborg, Paul (ed.), *Stato dell'Italia*, Milano, Il Saggiatore, 1994, Mondadori, pp. 78-82.

considered one of the sources of the Italian “malavita”, the maffia, camorra etcetera.¹³ In the end of the last century, the collapse of the Italian party system was provoked by the wide spread clientelism. The consequences of these state of Italian social and political culture involved almost the whole political ruling class.

Concerning the *style of the Italian political culture* we have to state first tone of the political discussions. The principal parties of a debate respect the adversary’s opinions. Even, the controversy is very big, Italian politicians can handle and manage the antagonisms and conflicts.

But between the persons involved in a political discussion sometimes there are enormous differences. The founder of the Forza Italia, Silvio Berlusconi, knows very well the fundamental laws of the political communications: he repeats some essential words and concepts to convince his camp. This is —apparently— a good method because, he even today continues (I don’t know until what time) to be political leader. But now, because of his personal attitude and mistakes he is losing all of his honour and respect. Contrasted with him, the right-hand side politician Gianfranco Fini tries to be much more well-balanced. He is always careful and considered in his decisions. Maybe, he can be considered like the most sophisticated person among the contemporary Italian politicians. In Machiavelli’s type of political cultural character —in our opinion— he is the typical fox. He is capable of changing his mind and political orientation in the interests of his party, the Alleanza Nazionale. The other political leader, leader of the Lega Nord, Umberto Bossi has a totally different political character. He is very impulsive in his speeches, he is personalizing the model of the populist political culture. He attacks everybody and says harsh things to his enemies.

Today, we wonder if Gianfranco Pasquino is right saying that Italian politicians could be characterized by Machiavelli’s types of political behavior: are they lions or foxes? Now, in Italian democratic society, there is no need for a “prince”, or a dictator. The participation of people in the political affairs is widely assured. But in Italy the alienated civic culture, the low sense of confidence and lack of competence —theoretized by Almond and Verba in their book— has changed only a little bit.

Appendix

In the last few decades in Italy there were many surveys concerning the Italian civic culture. In the Abacus Institute’s report (2005), in the last decade the sense of territoriality is going to grow, but faith and confidence in

¹³ Bernardi Alberto De, “Clientelismo”, *Stato dell’Italia, cit.*, pp. 83-86.

the parties remains very critical. Italians have become less individualistic persons, and they are more “social” people than earlier insisting on territorial divisions, like family, quarter or city. Now, it exists a “civicness” in the cities where the Italians rediscover the sense of the social cohesion. This new civicness has its roots in the Italian historical and cultural heritage.

The Abacus report studied social and public participation, the moral attitudes and values concerning the divisions in the territory, and confidence in the parties. According to the survey, Italians have confidence in the institutions (88%) and in the volunteer work (85%), but they have little confidence in the political parties and in their compatriots. Among the institutions, Italians have faith first of all in the police force and in the *carabinieri* corps (88%), in the voluntary associations (85%) and in the church (75%). *In the political parties, only 20 % of Italian population.* They have trust in European political institutions (about 70 %), and in the regional – comunal institutions (about 60 %), but in government and in Parliament only 40 % of the population have confidence.

If we consider the major topic of our presentation, we find confirmation in the survey because it stated that the ruling political class doesn't constitute a good example for the Italians to create and consolidate a real civic culture. The behavior of the Italian politicians and their moral attitude and values are accepted only by 77% of the population (the only exception is the Pope who is considered the most popular political personality). The real problem is that only the 75 % of the Italians are trusting in their compatriots. A very big problem of the attitude in the civic culture is the vandalism criticised by the majority of the Italians. Vandalism provokes a great quantity of rubbish and other problems all over the peninsula. It could be resolved with the help and participation of the people. Against the vandalism it would be necessary to augment the sense of civicness, first of all the prevention of the vandalism and the responsibility of the community. The solidarity among the citizens could be very important to resolve these problems. In that case, the school and the education would be primordial. But the civic education in the Italian school doesn't function very well, today.

According to the IARD survey (2000) the Italian young people (15-24 years old) had the following values between 1983 – 2000:

Very important values:

1983	1987	1992	1996	2000	
Family	81,9	82,9	85,6	85,5	85,7
Job	67,7	66,6	60,2	62,5	61,0
Friend/s	58,4	60,9	70,6	73,1	75,1*
Amusements	43,6	44,2	54,4	53,6	52,3
Study/culture	34,1	32,2	36,4	39,5	33,9
Sportive activity	32,1	31,9	36,1	34,3	32,9
Social activity	21,9	17,9	23,5	22,2	17,8
Religion	12,2	12,4	13,2	13,6	11,1
Political activity	4,0	2,9	3,7	4,7	3,7
Base	4.000	2.000	1.718	1.686	1.429

During the 1st and 2nd Italian Republics, according the most remarkable surveys and philosophers (like Norberto Bobbio), it was difficult to create a unified and solid national identity. One of the major reason of this, beyond civil society, is just the insufficiency of the civic culture. So, Italy has to continue to create the possibilities and the social, political conditions to promote a unified political and civic culture.