

# Reflections on Italian Parliamentary System

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*Italiako Parlamentua, 1861 urtetik, ohizko erakunde legegilea edo gobernuaren kontrola egiten zuen baina horrez gain, Italiaren nazio eraikuntza gidatu zuen: Buruzagi ezberdinen nahiak bateratuz, trenbide sarea bultzatuz edo kode edo lege komunak burutuz. Parlamentuaren errolaren inguruan gaizki ulertzeak gertatu ohi dira eta horren inguruan gogoeta egiten da. Italian politika erlijio edo ideologiaren arloan planteatu ohi da, zeregin praktikoa eta sekularra izan beharrean, intelektualen eraginez antiparlamentarismoa bizituz. Baina politikoak bateraguneak eta balore partekatuak bultzatu dituzte, bereziki Parlamentuan eta berau izan da ekintza politikoaren erdigunea.*

*Giltza-Hitzak: Italia. Parlamentua. Antiparlamentarioa. Intelektuala. Política. Erlijioa.*

*Además de su función ordinaria legislativa y de control, el Parlamento del Reino de Italia desde 1861 se ha distinguido por su compromiso con la construcción nacional italiana, amalgamando las clases dirigentes, fomentando la red ferroviaria y legislando códigos y leyes comunes. Este artículo reflexiona acerca del rol del Parlamento y los malentendidos que provoca. La política adquiere una dimensión religiosa o ideológica mas que una actividad secular o pragmática, fomentado desde ámbitos intelectuales y antiparlamentaristas. Sin embargo los políticos han contribuido a fomentar lugares de encuentro y valores compartidos particularmente desde el Parlamento, en tanto que centro de la acción política.*

*Palabras Clave: Italia. Parlamento. Antiparlamentario. Intelectual. Política. Religión.*

*En plus de sa fonction législative ordinaire et de contrôle, le Parlement du Royaume d'Italie depuis 1861 s'est distingué par son engagement avec la construction nationale italienne, amalgamant les classes dirigeantes, développant le réseau ferroviaire et légiférant des codes et des lois communs. Cet article examine le rôle du Parlement et les malentendus qu'il provoque. La politique acquiert une dimension religieuse ou idéologique plus qu'une activité séculaire ou pragmatique, fomentée depuis des milieux intellectuels et antiparlamentaristes. Néanmoins, les politiques ont contribué à fonder des lieux de rencontre et des valeurs partagées particulièrement depuis le Parlement, comme centre de l'action politique.*

*Mots-Clés : Italie. Parlement. Antiparlamentaire. Intellectuel. Politique. Religion.*

The aim of this presentation is to emphasize the contradiction between the role that Parliament has played in modern Italian history and the common negative opinion against politics that is spread in Italian society.

Firstly, I want to underline that Italian Parliament is characterized by a strong continuity, although it has changed different political regimes during the century and half since the unification of the country.

This continuity is marked by the bicameral system. Two Chambers have always worked with the same powers, excepted the Constituent Assembly after the second world war. With the Monarchy, senators were appointed by the king; with the Republic, they have been elected directly as the deputies. But the balancing function of bicameralism has survived in its integral version.

Beyond this structural aspect, Parliament has been in all the times the focal place for the political struggle. Every transition has been approved by the Parliament. Also the March on Rome by Mussolini was ratified in the Parliament through the confidence vote to his cabinet in November 1922. On the contrary, the authoritarian attempt made at the end of the XIX century by Pelloux was defeated in the Parliament thanks to the filibustering of the alliance between liberals, radicals and socialists. No other institution has had in Italian history the same capacity to legitimize or not political actors.

This role derives from the nation-building function that Italian Parliament has fulfilled even before the unification of the country. The Savoy dynasty linked its destiny to Italian future with the preservation of constitutional orders after the loss of the first independence war in 1849. The young king Vittorio Emanuele II was irremovable to the pressure of the Austrians for the abolition of the Constitution given by his father, king Carlo Alberto. So Turin became the only Italian capital to keep a Parliament open. Exiled patriots, politicians and intellectuals coming from the other States of the peninsula were elected deputies or appointed senators. They lent to Piedmont assemblies a true national aspect that attracted sympathies from all the country.

Since 1849 to 1859, under the direction by Massimo D'Azeglio and after by Camillo Cavour, the Parliament of the Kingdom of Sardinia was acknowledged as the Italian Parliament in embryonic stage. Its work was oriented to adequate public legislation and administration to the national aspirations of the dynasty, particularly in the field of the relations with the Catholic Church, the historical obstacle to Italian unification because of the Papal States. That Parliament used also to discuss the political strategies to achieve national objectives. The majority was created by an alliance of centre-right and centre-left, called the "connubio", but both the extreme right and the extreme left accepted parliamentary dialectics.

It is not casual that the legislatures of the new Kingdom of Italy, proclaimed in 1861, maintained the numeration of the previous Parliament. So the first one (1861-1865) was the eighth: another mark of institutional continuity. The

national function was obviously developed by the Parliament during the first decades of the unification. In both Chambers, representatives coming from different regions progressively amalgamated in a national ruling class. Initially, regional membership influenced political orientation (rightists were more from North and Central Italy; leftists more from the South). But after 20 years, a new alliance –the so called “trasformismo”– allowed to overcome the regional gap. Italian Parliament was in that period the protagonist of the legislative unification of the country, emanating new codes, laws and practices. Also the geographic unification was achieved by the Parliament financing the railway net and promoting statistics and parliamentary enquiries on social issues in order to make the country better known.

In that Parliament, the old republican Francesco Crispi –as many other fellows of democracy– declared his adhesion to the Monarchy; than became Speaker and Premier. Parliamentary life was the framework for the integration of revolutionary patriots, of regional representatives, of social rebels. Another old fellow of the irreducible Giuseppe Mazzini, the prophet of Republicanism, Alberto Mario admitted that Parliament was developing the Monarchical Constitution in a democratic sense. In 1882, the first socialist, Andrea Costa, was elected deputy. Only catholic representatives were out of Parliament because of the papal ban on supporting the State responsible of his exile in Vatican. But they were also destined to be integrated in the beginning of the twentieth century.

In the first fifty years of the Italian State, Parliament was involved in the progressive enlargement of the right to vote. Male universal suffrage was accomplished in 1912, after some intermediate stages. This objective was pursued by the left, but had supporters on the right too. Many liberals thought that the allowance to vote would have been able to attract the confidence of working classes. The result was achieved by Giovanni Giolitti, the father of modern industrial society in Italy, who should be recalled for his choice to make the State neutral in the conflict between workers and employers. His strength derived from the Parliament, where he was able to dialogue with socialists, in the attempt to make them accept the logic of reforms instead of that of revolution.

Although all these achievements could be ascribed to the Parliament, it is between the XIX and XX century that a negative image of representative institutions became to spread in Italian culture. The anti-parliamentary movement had many sources: aspirations to authoritarian changes, political scandals, criticism to patronage system, and so on. Polemics on Parliament and against parliamentarians was popular in the newspapers, in the novels, in the journals, and not only in the satire. A famous slogan was created at that time: “the real country is better than the legal country”. In other words, civil society is better than political class.

It is very interesting to mention that the stronger opponent to this vision was the first intellectual who studied the so called “Southern question”, the problem of the integration of Southern regions in the national framework, Giustino Fortunato. Thanks to his long parliamentary experience, he affirmed the opposite

vision, that legal country was better than the real country, that politicians and particularly parliamentarians were better than their electors, because they used to find solutions to the problems and not to complain or to protest merely.

This critical attitude towards politics is –as well known– a returning phenomenon in Italian history. But its roots are in this period and are perhaps linked with some original defects of the political system. I think that it should be more underlined who are the most promoters of the anti-parliamentary movement. They are intellectuals, journalists, writers, political thinkers, historians, coming essentially from middle classes. In Italy, this kind of people is too much embroiled with politics. So their analyses are not really independent and their aspirations are often concentrated in replacing politicians.

Polemics against Parliament has been one of the principal source for the naissance of Fascism. The declared hostile target for Mussolini was the Parliament. Fascism was also determined by the consequences of the first world war. And it is not casual that the entrance in the war was the first strategic political choice that was made in Italy not in the Parliament but exploiting mass demonstrations. For the first time the “piazza” prevailed over the Parliament, where the majority of deputies were against the war.

However, Fascism too was not able to cancel the Parliament. While the Senate was protected by the royal prerogatives, the Lower Chamber was transformed according to the principle of corporativism, but kept the numeration of the legislatures and even improved the system of parliamentary committees. Elections were firstly reduced to plebiscites and than abolished. But Parliament was always the negative mirror of the regime and so it was nevertheless in the heart of its rhetorical propaganda. On the other hand, the regime was the first big turn-over in Italian ruling class on the political side: a lot of new men (“*homines novi*”) came up.

It is not usual to recall that Dino Grandi, the author of the order of the day against Mussolini approved by the Great Council of Fascism in the night of July 25<sup>th</sup> 1943, signed that document as “*Presidente della Camera*” (speaker of the chamber), omitting the following words of “*fasci and corporazioni*” so to come back to the old name of the assembly. Parliament was still perceived as a national political symbol if Mussolini wanted it to be transferred to the North after his removal by the king and the foundation of the RSI (Italian Social Republic) under the Nazi control. At the same time, the new government appointed in Rome the speakers of the two Chambers, although it was clearly impossible to go on with any parliamentary activity. But it was the attempt to vindicate the legitimacy of the continuity of representative power.

The restoration of democracy after the second world war was passed of course through the Parliament. Even before the institutional referendum between Monarchy and Republic, antifascist parties agreed to create a representative body composed of delegations appointed by themselves. The bigger parties accepted to have the same number of seats as the smaller ones. The so

called “Consulta Nazionale” met in 1945 at Palazzo Montecitorio in Rome, the historical location of the Chamber of Deputies since 1871.

The Italians (males and females for the first time) elected the Constituent Assembly on June, 2<sup>nd</sup> 1946, in coincidence with the referendum. The election was held on the basis of the proportional system, firstly introduced in 1919 and than abolished by fascism. Although the leading Christian-Democrats broke in 1947 the cabinet alliance with leftist parties according to the world division imposed by cold war, they all cooperated in the redaction of the new Constitution that was finally approved in December 1947 by a large majority. Parliament became so the place of political mediation, mutual respect and institutional agreement. That is why the Republican Constitution, as the new national pact for Italy, confirmed the Parliament as its heart.

As well known, till 1992 Italian political system was characterized by the continuous presence of Christian Democrats (DC) in power and Communists (PCI) in opposition. But the constitutional solidarity survived and was very fructuous in the 70s and 80s in the fight against political terrorism. But also on the rightist side the mechanism of parliamentary legitimization worked. The neo-fascist movement –although forbidden by a constitutional provision– was allowed to parliamentary representation under the name of MSI (“Movimento Sociale Italiano”) and its leader was so keen in parliamentary practice to become the record-man in parliamentary eloquence.

Because of their exclusion from the cabinet area, both extreme parties found in Parliament their natural field of activity and became its strong advocates. In 1971, thanks to a reform of parliamentary standing orders, functions of political groups were strengthened promoting their cooperation instead of their confrontation. This role of Parliament was moreover emphasized in 1976, when for the first time a member of the opposition Communist party was elected speaker of the Lower Chamber. In those years, even some chairpersons of standing committees came from opposition parties.

Giorgio Amendola, one of the most prestigious leaders of PCI since antifascism, acknowledged that Italy developed more in the decades after the second world war than in the last centuries. Parliament contributed mainly to this process. It granted political stability to the country thanks to the constitutional pact. It made better known Italian society through fact-finding inquiries on poverty, emigration, but also organised crime. It passed historical reforms on agriculture, education, workers rights, environment, family law, public health, regionalism.

This view could seem too much optimistic in consideration of the collapse of Italian political system after the end of the cold war and the fall of Berlin wall. Otherwise, it would be a mistake to consider only the international situation as the cause of Italian political change since 1992. Many other factors have influenced it, but their specific role is differently evaluated according to various political tendencies.

One tendency privileges the moral issue and underlines the corruption of the old political class, praising the judiciary for its commitment in trials against political leaders. Another tendency stresses the vindications coming from localism in contraposition with the government of the capital, according to the arguments of the Northern League. But in my opinion the main factor was the binding power of the criteria of European Monetary Union that obliged Italy to leave out the political misuse of public expenditure and the substantial tolerance of fiscal evasion.

However, I think that a so radical change of the political system was possible only because of the persistence of the antiparliamentary attitude rooted in Italian public opinion and raised by intellectual elites. Since the 50s, political scientists denounced the phenomenon of the so called "partitocrazia", meaning by this neologism that political parties occupied all institutional and social spaces overcoming their constitutional position. In the following two decades, the extreme left boycotted parliamentary practices, calling people to political violence. In 1978, after a series of political scandals that involved also the President of the Republic of the time, who was obliged to resign, the proposal to abolish public funding to parties received the support by the 40% of the electorate.

According to this conception, Italian Parliament has never been representing citizens, but only political oligarchies or even criminal organisations. More moderately, another explanation criticizes the Italian political system in terms of "consociativismo", considering a poison for democracy the so called "compromesso storico".

It is obviously hard to tell today which is or will be the final result of long transition phase in Italian politics opened after the end of the cold war. But I want, concluding this reflections, to try to offer an interpretation based not on contingent events, but on a *longue durée* perspective, looking at the historical discrepancy between the role played by the Parliament and its misunderstanding in the dominant cultural streams. The underestimation of Parliament has been unfortunately practiced also in historiography. For example, one of the most spread collective history of Italy ("Storia d'Italia Einaudi") has published only in 2000 a volume on the Parliament, while in the previous volumes on Italian political and social history references to representative institutions are not considered central.

The interpretative-key is for me given by the fracture in Italian history between politicians and intellectuals, the first ones oriented to pragmatism, the second ones to ideology. So parliament has been the best place for ones, and the worst for the others. It is true that popular polemics against politics and politicians ("antipolitica") is certainly spread among all Italians, and relies upon a traditional mistrust in the public. But anti-parliamentarism has been more and more nourished by intellectual elites. That is why, till now, in both the political sides, politician pragmatism and intellectual radicalism have not still reached an affordable agreement able to give to the country a self-confident identity and constructive alternatives of government.