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Democratic sultanate, atomised pluralism, political engineering: Sartori and the paradoxes of the Italian political system

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Giovanni Sartori, one of the world's most prominent scholars in political science and the founding father of the discipline in Italy, passed away in April 2017. Born in Florence in 1924, he began his academic career at the University of Florence as lecturer in modern philosophy and professor of sociology, before becoming the first tenured professor of political science in Italy (1966-76). He then accepted an offer to teach in the USA, at Stanford University (1976-79) and Columbia University (1979-94) – in his short autobiography he wrote that he left Italy because ‘there was nothing more that I could accomplish there ... and Italian political science had attained sufficient momentum to keep going on its own’ (Sartori, 2009b, 336), yet the legend says that he was not happy with the electoral successes of the communist party (Armaroli, 2017; Massari, 2017). His reputation earned him numerous awards, honorary degrees, and prizes, most notably membership of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the Prince of Asturias Award for Social Sciences, lifetime achievement awards at both the European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR) and the American Political Science Association (APSA), and the Karl Deutsch Award of the International Political Science Association (IPSA).

This symposium revisits the contribution that Sartori, both as a scholar and as a public intellectual, made to better understanding contemporary Italian politics. His general scholarship includes lasting contributions to the theory of democracy, analysis of party systems, as well on methodology (Pasquino, 2005; Collier and Gerring, 2009; Passigli, 2015). True, Italian politics was not the primary concern for most of his academic career, largely because his approach was comparative, yet he saw it ‘as a sort of small, but well-endowed laboratory where some of his theories could be tested and falsified’ (Pasquino and Valbruzzi, 2017). Certainly, Italy kept him occupied upon his return from the USA in 1994, in the midst of major turmoil in the party, and more generally political, system. As *politologo militante* (Passigli, 2005), he shaped public debates through editorials in newspapers, pamphlets and appearances on TV. He did so with authority and irony, as aptly put by Joseph LaPalombara (2017): few political scientists “have used prose as originally, as brilliantly or sometimes as sarcastically as he. By any measure Sartori was as powerful an intellectual polemicist as our profession has known for the last century”. The pieces that are part of this symposium touch upon three interlinked themes: the fundamentals of democracy, party systems, institutional reform.

The first theme concerns the state of democracy in Italy in the so-called second Republic. As was to be expected, the role of Silvio Berlusconi in Italian politics was in stark contrast with his vision of democracy, one in which there is a clear separation of powers; thus, “the concentration of political, economic and media power in the hands of a single person and his most loyal entourage was a clear and direct breach of liberal democracy” (Pas-

quino and Valbruzzi, 2017). Sartori saw in the way Berlusconi ruled Italy, particularly in 2001-06, the transformation of the country into a sort of democratic sultanate, a court-like system with a harem, with elected officials gaining distinction regardless of their professional or political experience and abilities (Sartori, 2009a). The risk of a sultanistic regime, Pasquino and Valbruzzi (2017) warn, could well be extended to other cases in which small interest groups use power to pursue their ends – the implicit reference is to what have become known as ‘magic circles’ around leaders of increasingly personalised political parties. Interestingly, Sartori was not enthusiastic about the most recent emphasis on direct democracy, which clashed with his ideal of representative democracy (Massari, 2017).

The second theme revolves around the conceptualisation and functioning of the party system. In opposition to the prevailing view of Italy as an example of an ‘imperfect two-party system’ (in that no alternation between the two major parties was really possible, owing to the fact that one of them was excluded from government), Sartori argued that Italy was a case of polarised pluralism. This characterisation remained valid for (most of) the so-called First Republic, but there has been disagreement on whether it could also be applied to the Second Republic. Piero Ignazi (2017), looking at election outcomes between 1994 and 2013, claims that Italy could be classified as a polarised and radicalised system without an occupied centre, and without anti-system parties. In this, it shares some of the characteristics of polarised pluralism in that fragmentation remains quite considerable and ideological distance is also significant, but presents none of the characteristics of limited pluralism, except alternation in government. The conclusion is that, probably, ‘Sartori would have condemned the present party system as a ‘dog-cat’, a mixture of incompatible features’ (Ignazi, 2017). In fact, Sartori himself had discussed the possibility of a collapse of centrist parties already in the 1980s, so much so that the post-1994 situation would fit with what he called ‘atomised pluralism’, in which parties are just labels being faced with frequent splits and mergers (Pasquino and Valbruzzi, 2017).

The third theme relates to political engineering, which is closely linked to Sartori’s view of the relevance and applicability of political science. Oreste Massari (2017), in a first-hand account of Sartori’s role in shaping the process of institutional reforms in Italy, highlights that Sartori saw that the ‘majoritarian ideology’ had significant risks for a dysfunctional bipolar system like that of Italy – a perception that was translated into his vocal opposition to various electoral laws and attempted reforms of the (second part of the) Constitution. He was very critical, unsurprisingly, of the first hybrid system adopted in 1993 – which he sarcastically renamed the ‘Mattarellum’, playing on the name of its promoter, President Sergio Mattarella – in that it combined the defects of both majoritarian and proportional systems; he was also opposed to the 2005 electoral law -- a proportional system with a majority premium adopted by the centre-right government solely for partisan reasons – which, this time, insultingly, he dubbed the ‘Porcellum’ (pigsty) (Sartori, 1995, 2004). Along similar lines, he opposed the 2005/06 proposals for a ‘strong premiership’, with a directly or indirectly elected prime minister accompanied by a sort of federalism – proposals which, in his view, would lead to an ‘unconstitutional constitution’ (Sartori, 2006). He also had a negative opinion of the constitutional reform passed by the Renzi government and rejected by citizens in the 2016 referendum (Pasquino and Valbruzzi, 2017). A potential solution to the pathologies of the Italian political system, then, was the introduction of semi-presidentialism and a two-ballot

system, a recommendation which he made relentlessly, but which remained unheeded, even during his protracted honeymoon with policy-makers on both sides of the left-right divide throughout the 1990s (Sartori, 1995, 2004, 2006).

In his ‘second life’, that of public intellectual, Sartori touched upon a number of topical issues concerning Italy, Europe and, more ambitiously, humankind. First, he argued that global challenges such as climate change, water scarcity and energy insecurity, are to a large extent the consequence of the population boom. Thus, he criticised both the Catholic Church, for its myopic position on birth control, and governments from both the right and the left, for their ‘ostrich policy’, ultimately aggravating an already grim situation (Sartori, 2011, 2015). Second, he denounced the risks of uncontrolled migration flows, with flexible border policies and generous asylum policies posing significant economic and social threats to Italy and Europe. Even more controversially, he criticised multiculturalism, arguing that any attempt to integrate people with completely different cultural principles and religions is doomed to failure: bluntly put, Muslim groups are not ‘integrable’ into Western societies and often develop a defensive form of radicalism (Sartori, 2000). Third, while not directly attacking it as a means of communication, he maintained that television impoverishes and makes people more credulous and naive, causing a sort of cultural regression: *homo sapiens* was gradually being replaced a new type of man, *homo videns*, incapable of thinking, and placing much emphasis on powerful images (Sartori, 1997).

Last and certainly not least, Sartori was instrumental in the (re-)birth of political science in Italy. Following on the work of key intellectuals like Mosca, Pareto and Michels, he fought hard to introduce political science into the curricula of faculties that called themselves faculties of the political sciences, and to affirm its credibility in a country dominated by two opposing cultural traditions, Marxist materialism and Crocian idealism (Calise, 2017; Cotta, 2017; Panebianco, 2017): after all, his view was, ‘how can we have political sciences in the plural without a political science in the singular that explains what all the rest is about?’ (Sartori, 2009b, 333). Not only did he start forming a group of young scholars who by the 1980s had full-time positions in many universities in Italy, but he was the *deus ex machina* for two milestones in the birth of the discipline in Italy. In 1971, he launched the *Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica*, which was crucial in setting the standards of good political science and consolidating its independence from other disciplines. In 1973, he promoted the creation of an autonomous section for political science within the *Associazione Italiana di Scienze Politiche e Sociali*, until, in 1981, the *Società Italiana di Scienza Politica* (SISP) was formally established (Pasquino, 2005; Cotta, 2017; Pombeni, 2017). Whether and how his legacy in Italy will be preserved is a moot point – interestingly, he saw in the evolution of the discipline in the USA tendencies towards excessive specialisation and excessive quantification, leading to irrelevance and sterility. There is however no doubt that, with the passing of Giovanni Sartori, political science in Italy, and in the world, has lost one of the most influential contemporary figures in the field of comparative politics.

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