

This article was downloaded by: [Ingenta Content Distribution - Routledge]

On: 26 December 2010

Access details: Access Details: [subscription number 791963552]

Publisher Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Journal of Modern Italian Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713699215>

Italy in *Chiaroscuro*: the dark shadows of modern Italian society

Andrea Mammone^a; Giuseppe A. Veltri^a

^a New York University, Florence, and London School of Economics and Political Science,

To cite this Article Mammone, Andrea and Veltri, Giuseppe A.(2008) 'Italy in *Chiaroscuro*: the dark shadows of modern Italian society', *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 13: 3, 297 – 304

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/13545710802218486

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13545710802218486>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.informaworld.com/terms-and-conditions-of-access.pdf>

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

INTRODUCTION

Italy in *Chiaroscuro*: the dark shadows of modern Italian society

Andrea Mammone and Giuseppe A. Veltri

New York University, Florence, and London School of Economics and Political Science

Abstract

Italy's incapacity of dealing with an increasing decline should be attributed to a number of chronic problems, not only economic ones, which have never been seriously faced by Italian society and politics. Despite the frequent presence of these issues in public discourse, a lack of analytical commitment has favoured a superficial and rhetorical engagement. A common theme of incompleteness in the attempts at applying a solution unifies different problems presented in this special issue: from federal reform of the state to the lack of political reconciliation, from the troubled Italian southern regions to the policies towards families. This special issue aims to analyse some of the most critical and unsolved Italian problems, and tries to cast some light on the many 'shadows' that still persist in the country of *la dolce vita*.

Keywords

Italy, chronic problems, decline, public discourse, politics, indigenous causes.

Italy – well-known as a nation of art, culture and beautiful landscapes – has a long history of unsolved issues that characterize this relatively young democracy. Indeed, Italy represents a land with a weak sense of nationhood, strong politicization of social life, quarrelling parties, unstable governmental coalitions, growing inequalities between regions, the presence of dramatic organized crime and widespread corruption in public life. From the start the Italian *dolce vita* has thus had many shadows at its core.

As suggested, many of these problems are by no means novel within Italian history. In the early 1970s, a former social-democrat minister titled his manuscript '*Italia malata*' (Preti 1972).¹ However, in the past ten years, the image of a country 'in trouble', with constant difficulties as well as an 'agitated' political history, is even more recurrent; and even contemporary book titles often seem to refer to a population of 'discontents' (Ginsborg 2003), or to a 'dark' national 'heart' (Jones 2003), or directly warn of a nation which is 'not a normal country' (Andrews 2005) and facing a certain *deriva* (Stella and Rizzo 2008a).²

The word *decline* has been at the centre of the Italian public discourse in both 2006 and 2008 elections. All parties and candidates acknowledged the difficult situation through which Italy is living and the many shadows of Italian society. Several foreign newspapers – such as the *The Times* (Owen 2007), *The Financial Times* (Lachman 2006) and *The New York Times* (Singer 2007) – defined the Italian people as ‘depressed’ and too worried about the present to think about the future of their country. Many books have been published on the Italian decline framing it mostly as an economic decline: the incapacity of Italian capitalism to face the challenges of globalization (see, e.g. Galli 2006; Petrini 2004; Toniolo and Visco 2004). Prevalently, a particular emphasis has been given on the loss of competitiveness of the Italian industrial system and the under-average growth of Italian gross domestic product (GDP) compared with the rest of the European Union (EU). It is probably the first time, after the flamboyant and ‘swinging’ 1980s, and the confused, hectic and uncertain 1990s, that an incredibly diffuse awareness of political, economic and social decline has spread throughout the Italian public sphere and this was followed by a sudden drop in the perceived quality of life (see for example Bastasin 2007; Cerruti 2007; D’Argenio 2007; Floris 2007; Masci 2007).

Despite this, a remarkable process seems to have occurred in the Italian public discourse. Since the beginning of the 1990s, Italian society has lived in a very similar condition to that which individuals experience as ‘cognitive polyphasia’ (Moscovici 1961), that is, the co-existence of rarely compatible representations. From a highly perceived quality of life, Italians had to accommodate the disturbing picture that several chronic problems and contradictions that have been ignored for a very long time during which they had assumed dramatic proportions and gravity. This has generated paradoxes such as having one of the highest turnouts in a general election in Europe and at the same time one of the most chaotic and inefficient political systems of the EU.

Setting aside a general growing ‘hostility’ towards politicians and the coverage of scandals in the Italian press (Cepernich 2008), a public discussion about the most serious of these current problems has never really taken place, leaving the task to sporadic initiatives by short-term governments, fragments of institutions or even the civil society. It is hard to deny the role of global economic and social processes in shaping the fortune of each nation, thus globalization has certainly played a role in the Italian economic crisis, but it does not explain the chronic fatigue that seems to afflict Italian society. Similar to the damage produced by the circulation of unrestrained toxins, Italy’s old problems played the role of debilitating Italian society, resulting in a lack of reaction to the new challenges posed by the increasing role of world socio-economic processes. This has become a process of externalization of guilt in which the causes of the Italian decline have been attributed to outside factors rather than Italy’s incapacity to deal with its chronic problems (Tremonti 2007).

Despite this, on the one hand, contemporary academic contributions, and especially journal special issues and edited volumes, have not usually focussed on the Italian ‘decline’ or ‘crisis’, and ‘shadows’ thereof. Traditional studies tend to focus much more on elections or political actors and systems. On the other hand, in the 1990s, following the Tangentopoli scandal and the collapse of the so-called *Prima Repubblica*, much of the literature, especially in English, began to deal with the Italian ‘transition’ and ‘crisis’.³ This is the case in Martin Bull and Martin Rhodes’ special edition of *West European Politics*, entitled ‘Crisis and Transition in Italian Politics’, and published in 1997 (Bull and Rhodes 1997).⁴ At that time, public expectations were high, and most Italians, along with the mass media and social scientists, were optimistic that a new and much better phase in Italy’s political history was about to begin.

Yet, according to Bull and Rhodes, it was clear that

the apparent or real overhaul of parties and political alliances that accompanied the *tangentopoli* corruption scandals was a critical moment to be sure; but it and of itself it could not have resolved the crisis. Rather, it changed the guard – which had been part agent and part victim of the system’s problems – and raised the prospect that a new modernising political class might emerge to manage the structural crisis and steward a wider-reaching process of reform. (Bull and Rhodes 2007: 659)

This transition to the *Seconda Repubblica* finished, in our analytical framework, as a never-ending process and with general sense of disillusionment. As Bull and Rhodes also put it, ‘ten years later... it is fair to speak of a feeling of dashed expectations. The much-vaunted “Second Republic” has clearly not arrived, even if the “First” is apparently clearly no longer with us’ (Bull and Rhodes 2007: 660).⁵

In other words, if in the early 1990s the birth of a new and unstoppable political and ethical renovation seemed to *apparire all’orizzonte*, in reality this ‘new politics’ never started, or at least not as desired or claimed. The new Republic, at least with its political scandals, showed some dangerous patterns of continuity with the pre-*Tangentopoli* political and institutional system. This early 1990s crisis therefore did not bring a genuine *cambiamento* and many of the structural and civic-cultural problems remained unsolved. These are the ‘shadows’ that continue to hang over Italian society and which obviously have not come from the blue.

Some of these ‘shadows’ were also partially highlighted in another interesting scholarly endeavour that analyses the peninsula from a different standpoint, notably Jean-Marie Bouissou and Marc Lazar’s edited comparative analysis of Italy and Japan. It represents one of the few exceptions to the trend of sole electoral or political system-focused analyses. This group of (mostly French) scholars first met in Paris in December 1998 and produced a special edition of the *Revue Française de Science Politique* in 2001. The idea was that, in spite of a different geographical location and culture, Italy and Japan shared

Introduction

many traits such as political fragmentation, corruption, *clientelismo*, delegitimization of ruling elites, people's dissatisfaction towards politics, and criminality. Contributors therefore pertinently rejected all exceptionalist approaches that considered both countries as 'anomalies', and in some ways opposed to the 'idealized' model of North American democracy. Instead, they considered Italy and Japan as genuine and 'fully legitimized' political realities, and also effectively operative just like the idealized democratic system *made in USA* (Bouissou and Lazar 2001: 533).

We similarly reject any narrow analytical framework or exceptionalist readings of domestic history. However, it is argued here that Italy shows some particular and specific features that can certainly be compared with similar countries, but which appear to be incongruous to many other functioning Western democracies. In such a context, and far from providing an exhaustive analysis, our special edition thus aims to provide an overview of contemporary Italy, and consequently highlights some of the most salient, and very often neglected, political, social and economic 'shadows' over the country. Some of these shadows have helped to shape and influence the construction of contemporary Italian identity, politics and society. They can in fact help to explain the current crisis and 'decline' that the country is currently facing (and, often, in spite of a certain 'silence' from mainstream politics).

Given this, it is argued here that the Italian decline can be understood better only through a series of systematic analyses that attempt to readdress the spotlight on unsolved criticalities that, although present in the public discourse, have been considered mostly as rhetorical tools in the political competition. As has been mentioned already, certainly more than many other industrialized nations, Italy's social, economic and political problems have remained surprisingly constant over the decades. This is despite the peninsula moving from a position of miserable poverty after the Unification in the late 1800s to that of one of the world's richest industrial nation-states.

Any special issue faces the inevitable limitations of space that will force the editors to select some issues rather than others. As pointed out above, our choice is to focus on some chronic and unsolved Italian problems that have been widely present in the public discourse, but only in a superficial and unchallenged manner dominated by their rhetorical use in the political arena and by the mass media.

Besides the political economic strategies of the contenders and state of the public finances, the public discourse in the last two general elections focused particularly on the role of the family, federalism, the never-ending emergency of Southern Italy, political fragmentation and national reconciliation. However, as stated above, none of these issues have been at the centre of a serious discussion and object of political competition regardless of the many contradictions and paradoxes that this special issue aims to unveil.

A first example of detachment from reality is the recent public discourse on the family that has been at centre of political debate. Bernini in her

contribution argues that the confrontation on what constituted a family has been a factor of division between political parties for quite some time in recent Italian history. However, she argues, an ideological approach prevailed and prevented any serious investigation of the actual transformation of contemporary family life in Italy (see also Bei 2007). Hence, public debate focuses on what the ideal family should be and ignores what Italian families have actually become.

Second, another example of departure from reality is the public promotion of *federalismo* – notably the federal reorganization of the state – which has been depicted as the solution of several complex problems. Indeed, it has been represented as a fundamental tool to promote development of the southern regions and, at the same time, to remove the obstacle of further economic growth in the richest areas of Northern Italy. Roux offers here an article in which he analyses the trajectory of Italian federalism in its implementation, paradoxes and underachievement. He proposes a more critical perspective on this ‘institutional/constitutional instrument’ that is really believed as a somewhat *panacea di tutti i mali* by almost all the political spectrum (although a referendum on a federal reform of the state system was rejected by Italians in 2006).

Third, in spite of constant funds received from the EU (La Spina 2007), the underdevelopment of southern *Mezzogiorno* is another never-ending emergency of modern Italy. Once again, it has been at centre of the public discourse because of the theatrical waste crisis in the Campania region.⁶ In this context, we present an article from Felia and Percy Allum that analyses this region through the lenses of two most dramatic aspects of this troubled land: *clientelismo* and organized crime. Campania represents a typified example of state in which Italian southern regions are. There was a brief return of hope in the early 1990s with the rise of a new political season following the previously mentioned *Tangentopoli* – but such expectations revealed to be over-optimistic. Felia and Percy Allum analyse the political season of Antonio Bassolino, first mayor of Naples and later governor of Campania for the Centre–Left coalition.

Fourth, the economic underdevelopment of the southern regions is also the topic covered by Iona, Leonida and Sobbrío. They demonstrate how the process of industrialization policy in the South stopped from 1971 and afterwards. This is another example of how the economic development of the *Mezzogiorno* has not been part of the real political agenda for a long time, almost indicating a sort of ‘giving up’ in trying to modernize these regions. This article also shows that Italian economy is in fact based on a two-velocity economic system that is the outcome of endogenous processes rather than external ones.

Fifth, as we have already put it, the Italian political system is well known for its instability, fragmentation and incapacity of identifying common national interests. In such a context, Conti analyses the role, and ‘challenge’, of small parties in the past ruling Centre–Left coalition led by Romano Prodi. The

latter coalition's total lack of success is considered to be the main reason for the appointment of the new Berlusconi government. This article also discusses the formation of the new two major parties, namely the *Partito Democratico* and the *Popolo della Libertà*, that were born as an answer to the need to reduce political fragmentation. Needless to say, this process is far from being concluded. The new '*semplificato*' political system stemming from the 2008 elections needs to be tested over the time (and movements such as the *Lega Nord* and *Italia dei Valori* have not joined the two macro-parties).

Finally, the election of 2008 and its results, a clear victory of Berlusconi together with a great performance of *Lega Nord*, already prompted the label *Terza Repubblica* in the public discourse. However, as Cento-Bull argues, the transition from First to Second Republic has not been complete (and we have also discussed this above). Instead, there is a strong resistance from the main political actors to recover a shared a truth, favouring more a 'collective amnesia'. Ideological and political divisions are far from being removed and a common perception of national history has not been achieved. This process was already observed for Benito Mussolini's Fascism and its legacy (Mammone and Veltri 2007; Mammone 2006). Most interestingly, according to Cento-Bull, the lack of reconciliation of the harsh conflicts during the 1960s and 1970s, particularly, left a constant presence of conspiracy theory and victimization myths in the Italian public sphere.⁷

All these contributions share the common theme of a sense of incompleteness that affects Italy, of the lack of planning, of the general tendency of starting and never finishing important reforms and changes.

One of the greatest limitations in the Italian public sphere is the very limited contribution of the academic community, and in particular of social scientists, in the public debate to avoid a superficial and rhetorical framing of such delicate issues. Instead, the academic community should be fundamental to help defining the scope and the solutions of the unsolved problems that still afflict Italian society, politics, collective memory, and economy. Moreover, old issues might have evolved in a mutated political, social and economic contest and therefore they might require a new frame to be analysed. The analytical skills of the academic community should serve the purpose of helping policy-makers in making informed choices. It is especially in this context that this special issue should be considered, as an attempt to go over the simplification of the Italian public (and at times academic) discourses on several important issues that are at the roots of the *Belpaese's* decline; a simplification that often tries to promote a sort of *Il Gattopardo*-type solution and change: *tutto cambi perchè nulla cambi*.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Paul Corner and John Davis for their *costante supporto* in the making of this special edition. We also owe a debt of gratitude to Gabriela Borz and Giuseppe Costa for their useful suggestions.

Notes

- 1 Luigi Preti, a leading member of the *Partito Socialdemocratico Italiano* (PSDI), was first elected in parliament in 1946 and held important positions such as *Ministro delle Finanze*, *Ministro del Commercio Estero*, and *Ministro per il Bilancio e la Programmazione Economica*.
- 2 These two journalists from *Il Corriere della Sera* had an incredible editorial success with their previous book *La Casta* where they showed *privilegi, sprechi* and *impunità* of the Italian political class (Stella and Rizzo 2007). For an overview of *La Deriva* see Stella and Rizzo (2008b).
- 3 As Nicola Tranfaglia lamented, in Italy ‘a partire dai primi anni Novanta [...] numerosi studiosi hanno lavorato, con ottiche diverse, a ricostruire le principali vicende politiche, sociali, culturali ed economiche del cinquantennio repubblicano. Ma lo spazio e l’attenzione dedicata agli ultimi dieci anni sono stati, di necessità, assai scarsi: da un lato, molte opere si sono fermate agli anni Novanta; dall’altro, prima degli ultimi avvenimenti, il futuro appariva per molti aspetti ancora incerto e indeterminato’ (Tranfaglia 2004: 9).
- 4 It is worth noting that before this 1997 contribution, the last special issue of *West European Politics* entirely devoted to Italian politics only harked back to 1979; but it similarly referred to ‘Italy in Transition’ (Lange 1979).
- 5 In 2007, Bull and Rhodes repeated their successful editorial work and replicated with a new edition on Italian politics, and where they argue that rather than a ‘transition’, Italy is now dealing with ‘a post-crisis process of institutional (re-) stabilisation and negotiated change in which the “new” (or at least substantial parts of it) looks remarkably similar to the “old”’ (Bull and Rhodes 2007: 662).
- 6 It is worth remembering that in the most *drammatici* days people also attacked police forces (Cervasio 2008).
- 7 For example, during the last election for the mayor of Rome, the rape of a young South-African woman in the periphery of the city by a Romanian citizen re-framed the campaign of the two candidates, Rutelli (centre-left) and Alemanno (centre-right), on the issues of law and order. The same rape became the centre of a conspiracy theory (Sarzanini 2008) that considered the whole incident as set up by Alemanno to win the election (Alemanno won the election rather surprisingly).

References

- Andrews, G. (2005) *Not a Normal Country: Italy after Berlusconi*, London: Pluto Press.
- Bastasin, C. (2007) ‘L’anno della fiducia. Gli Italiani non credono nelle potenzialità del loro Paese’, *La Stampa*, 31 December.
- Bei, F. (2007) ‘La famiglia cattolica in declino: calano battesimi e nozze religiose’, *La Repubblica*, 10 May.
- Bouissou, J.-M. and Lazar, M. (2001) ‘Comparer deux “démocraties hors norms”’, special edition: ‘Italie et Japon aujourd’hui: deux “démocraties hors norms” à l’épreuve de la crise’, *Revue Française de Science Politique* 51(4): 531–43.
- Bull, M. and Rhodes, M. (eds) (1997) *Crisis and Transition in Italian Politics*, Special Edition of *West European Politics*, 20(1).
- and ——— (2007) ‘Introduction – Italy: a contested polity’, in *Italy: A Contested Polity*, Special Edition of *West European Politics* 30(4): 657–69.
- Cerruti, G. (2007) ‘Una Milano da sberle. Dagli appalti truccati ai manager incompetenti’, *La Repubblica*, 16 May.
- Cepernich, C. (2008) ‘Landscapes of immorality: scandals in the Italian press (1986–2006)’, *Perspectives on European Politics and Society* 9(1): 95–109.

Introduction

- Cervasio, S. (2008) 'Caos rifiuti, assalto al commissariato: bombe carta e sassi contro la polizia', *La Repubblica*, 5 January.
- D'Argenio, A. (2007) 'Italia ventunesima in Europa', *La Repubblica*, 27 February.
- Floris, G. (2007) "'Ecco l'Italia dei raccomandati'", *La Stampa*, 4 November.
- Galli, G. (2006) *Poteri deboli. La nuova mappa del capitalismo nell'Italia del declino*, Milano: Mondadori.
- Ginsborg, P. (2003) *Italy and Its Discontents. Family, Civil Society, State. 1980–2001*, London: Penguin Books.
- Jones, T. (2003) *The Dark Heart of Italy: Travels Through Time and Space Across Italy*, London: Faber and Faber.
- Lachman, D. (2006) 'Italy Follows Argentina Down Road to Ruin', *Financial Times*, 16 March.
- Lange, P. (ed.) (1979) *Italy in Transition: Conflict and Consensus*, Special Edition of *West European Politics*, 2(3).
- La Spina, L. (2007) 'E' a Bruxelles la capitale del Sud. Un fiume di soldi dall'Europa al Meridione: 100 miliardi in 7 anni', *La Stampa*, 4 May.
- Mammone, A. (2006) 'A daily revision of the past. Fascism, anti-fascism, and memory in contemporary Italy', *Modern Italy* 11(2): 211–26.
- and Veltri, G. (2007) 'La memoria daltonica del fascismo', *Il Ponte* 62(3): 89–97.
- Masci, R. (2007) 'Al Nord-Est la scuola migliore. Il rapporto Ocse: solo lì si supera la media europea. Allarme Italia: uno su due non capisce quello che legge', *La Stampa*, 5 December.
- Moscovici, S. (1961) *La psychanalyse son image et son public*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- Owen, R. (2007) 'La dolce vita turns sour as Italy faces up to being old and poor', *The Times*, 22 December.
- Petrini, R. (2004) *Il declino dell'Italia*, Roma-Bari: Laterza.
- Preti, L. (1972) *Italia malata*, Milano: Mursia.
- Sarzanini, F. (2008) 'Sospetti e veleni sullo stupro di Roma', *Corriere della Sera*, 26 April.
- Singer, P. (2007) 'In a funk, Italy sings an aria of disappointment', *The New York Times*, 13 December.
- Stella, G. A. and Rizzo, S. (2007) *La Casta. Così i politici italiani sono diventati intoccabili*, Milano: Rizzoli.
- and —— (2008a) *La Deriva. Perché l'Italia sta naufragando*, Milano: Rizzoli.
- and —— (2008b) 'Dai bidelli agli onorevoli. Un'Italia alla deriva', *Corriere della Sera*, 28 April.
- Toniolo, G. and Visco, V. (2004) *Il Declino economico dell'Italia*, Milano: Bruno Mondadori.
- Tranfiglia, N. (2004) *La transizione italiana. Storia di un decennio*, Milano: Garzanti.
- Tremonti, G. (2007) *La paura e la speranza*, Milano: Mondadori.