

The Moral Question in Italian Politics

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Corruption in Italy is a constantly debated problem. However, it is largely framed as a moral and legal issue. This piece suggests instead that the root of the corruption problem is political and constitutional, as it lies in the creation and degeneration of clientelistic networks as the most straightforward way for the generation of political consensus given the Italian context. Only a complete overhaul of the state's fundamental structures, which unfortunately appears unlikely, may diminish the role of clientelism and hence of its teratological developments.

The issue of corruption has [never abandoned](#) the core of Italian political discussions, and understandably so. Indeed the country's situation is invariably and significantly worse than its major European partners in all [corruption metrics](#), possibly being the most corrupt among [developed nations](#), with an accelerating trend in recent decades. Numerous studies have highlighted that corruption, mainly defined by bribery, embezzlement, and other forms of power abuse, is extremely costly for the country, while it has certainly [contributed](#) to its massive national debt, locking Italy in a trajectory of endless stagnation and decline.

However, in the national press and political communication in general, the problem is overwhelmingly framed as a moral and [legal issue](#). Certainly these are important aspects of the matter. But this is also not the most productive approach, neither intellectually, nor from a practical perspective, and the lack of substantial progress over such a very long period of time should prompt some deeper reflection and re-formulation of the basic question.

Instead of concentrating on a moral and criminal-legal narrative, it is time to address the problem as a political question. The root of Italy's corruption problem is mainly political, i.e. it is a structural feature of how political consensus is created and can be created in the country.



How can a regime enhance its consensus base?

Every political regime, democratic or non-democratic, anywhere and in any age, needs consensus. How can political leadership possibly gain such consensus from the society? At close scrutiny, it is arguable that there exist only a limited number of ways to achieve it, in practice only the following four:

- Consensus is reached by rational discussion and consensus-making procedures as well as institutions in the context of a highly developed civil society (Habermas's *public sphere*). This is (or used to be) the prevailing model of Nordic societies, or the Netherlands, and partly in UK, Germany, France. The creation of a highly developed civil society is the key to achieve this consensus making model, but there is no clear recipe on how to build one, and historically this may take rather unique circumstances as well as numerous generations.

- Consensus is built by means of force, i.e. political violence and/or the threat thereof. This can be very effective in limited cases for limited amounts of time, raises grave ethical questions, and it is certainly extremely costly.
- Consensus is built on the foundations provided by the authority (*auctoritas facit legem*) and prestige of certain individuals, or organisations. The authority of the state is largely reflected in the respect paid to its symbols. Authority is gained historically as a stratification of positive results, even resistance to oppression and martyrdom, as well as military victories.
- Consensus is fundamentally traded in exchange for (direct or indirect) economic benefits financed with public resources, whether legal or even against the law, and in this second case one may have what is usually considered as corruption in a technical sense. An arrangement for consensus making based on continuous and immediate *quid pro quo* (clientelism) can function smoothly for quite a long time, until the leadership runs out of resources to distribute, also as a consequence of negative feedback effects generated by this very system on economic wealth production.

Every government gains consensus from the society utilizing a mix of these four methods, according to the available resources: authority and prestige, force and the ability/opportunity to use it, a strong civil society (if available), economic wealth.

The specificities of consensus making in Italy

In the case of Italy, one has to wonder what instruments the state possesses to enhance consensus, particularly within a constitutional order which allows high political fragmentation and *de facto* veto powers to numerous actors within a centralised structure.

1. It is well known that Italy has a fairly undeveloped civil society in comparison to other Western nations, despite [claims](#) that civil society has made some progress in the past decades. Even so, the role of rational discussion in the Italian context remains quite limited, and so its consensus-generating power.
2. Large-scale use of force is clearly illegal and, at least at the moment, not viable in the current constitutional as well as international (especially European) context, not to mention the prevailing political culture. It remains therefore confined to emergency situations and/or checking extremist political actors (subversive groups, terrorists, etc).
3. The Italian state has little authority and cannot extract much consensus on the basis of the perceived prestige emanating from its symbols, its institutions and from its key political representatives, who have little achievement to show, either on the political or economic front, in the past decades, and certainly in the lifetime of most Italian citizens. The state presents itself instead often in the decaying image of dilapidated public buildings (especially [schools](#), so that children learn about the condition of their state from the very beginning), inefficient and Kafkaesque [bureaucracy](#), political figures of abysmal incompetence and non-existent communication skills, who can even provoke a certain nostalgia for the era of [Andreotti](#).

Against this background, it should be no surprise that consensus has been constructed on the basis of an economic exchange, which often leads to corruption. Corruption is practically unavoidable in the structure of the Italian political landscape and constitution. It is simply the extension into illegal territory of widespread (legal) practices going on for decades, such as for instance, among many others, the expansion beyond any reasonable measure of the number of public employees (Sicily's park rangers are [28,000](#) against 16,000 in the [US](#) national park service), tax exemptions for entire categories (e.g. properties of the Catholic Church, and so on), exorbitant privileges for numerous civil servants or politicians and their families, pensions, public contracts, the [€80 bonus](#) enacted by Renzi, or the proposed "citizenship income" (*reddito di cittadinanza*). However irritating, these practices are constitutive of political consensus. During the corruption scandals which shook the country in the mid-1990s and brought to an end

the so called first Republic, former PM [Bettino Craxi](#) made clear in his defence that certain corruption practices were indeed the inevitable aspect of consensus building, with little to no alternative within that given context. Although he was, as he publicly admitted, legally culpable, his historical and political point remains valid, even more so since, after those scandals and the related legal inquiries, corruption practices have continued undiminished to the present. They cannot abate or simply disappear, they are a constitutive and irreplaceable part of the consensus making, which is essential for the existence of the state.

This does not mean, of course, that corruption ought to be accepted given its inevitability in the present context. It means however that it cannot be eradicated, or at least greatly constrained, unless consensus building by other means becomes possible. Again, this is a political question, not only an ethical and legal one.

As an aside, the recurrent framing of corruption as an ethical problematique (*la questione etica*) appears furthermore grounded on a simplistic view of ethics itself, and the morality of the state and of public life more in general, as if principles of public morality were indeed uncontroversial, obvious to anyone, their non-observance being due solely to sheer lack of good will. This is not so. Without going into the details of complex and century-old philosophical discussions, one should wonder what can be the source of morality, given the historical shift away from the traditional sources of ethical norms grounded, in the case of Italy, in Catholic doctrines, and a massive work of de-construction of societal “values” which has not been followed by any meaningful re-construction. Ethical norms do not hang in the air.

The question of state authority

If corruption is practically inevitable in the current prospects for consensus making, in order to tackle it one must think of reducing clientelism by strengthening other practices. Excluding the outright use of force, it only remains the enhancement of the authority of the state, and the construction of a thicker and better functioning civil society capable of rational discussion. This latter has been and still is the main idea of any modernisation project, including the programmatic goal of a system of continental governance like the EU, but it has proved to be elusive, for reasons which would be too long and complex to address in this piece.

The enhancement of the authority of the state and its institutions appears therefore in theory as the only element within the consensus-making mix which can be significantly expanded, thus allowing for a reduction in clientelism and corruption. In practice however, things are not at all that simple.

A brief historical digression is necessary at this point. Italy as a unified country was born out of revolutions and wars in 1861 as the Kingdom of Italy, under the leadership of the Savoy dynasty. There is no doubt that the king and his army (the primary institution of that time) enjoyed a remarkable prestige capital acquired during the “national liberation” of *Risogimento*, a prestige which lasted well into the twentieth century until 1943 with alternate fortunes (the monarchy was finally abolished by referendum on 2nd June 1946). For an overwhelmingly agricultural society such as Italy in the second half of the nineteenth century, and where only a tiny fraction of the population had the right to vote (suffrage by census), the problem of consensus was limited to a small elite in a few urban contexts, aristocratic families, and the Church. The vast mass of citizens lived in the countryside according to traditional forms of local socio-economic organisation, with limited political participation at national level. The newly unified Italian state was created with a strongly centralised structure, similar to the Prussian model, where the country was divided in provinces, each run by an appointee of the King’s government: the prefect. This model accounted for no substantial diversity, which is instead astonishing in Italy at all level (geographical, historical, cultural, even linguistic), and it was therefore flawed from the very start.

With the early industrialisation at the turn of the century, vast masses of Italians became increasingly politicised, and the fabrication of consensus increasingly complex. As in other European countries, nationalism was widely harnessed for mass mobilisation. However, Italian nationalism has always been peculiar, as Italians do not fit well

any definition of nation: there is indeed something in common among Italians, but it is probably too thin to build a classical nation state on it. As the sheer prestige of the Savoy dynasty was no longer sufficient, the country sought for additional narratives of unity within a centralised state. Fascism provided one based on the myth of Rome, but it was anachronistic, little credible, and got eventually destroyed by the war. After 1945 the new constitution substantially inherited the administrative structure of the previous era. Regions were created, but only the five regions with special status (Valle D'Aosta, Trentino-Alto Adige/Südtirol, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Sicily, and Sardinia) gained some degree of autonomy, while the rest were not even fully functioning institutions until the 1970s, and still they are a curious half-backed local institution with limited powers, high costs, unclear jurisdiction.

The whole question of national identity was bracketed and pushed aside while Italy was kept together more by the geopolitical pressures characterising the Cold War period than any national discourse. Not surprisingly, as the Cold War came to an end, the question of unity and national identity resurfaced, being clumsily articulated, and unfortunately largely wasted, by the Northern League movement. This is very regrettable, because the question of national unity, of the authority of the state, of consensus making, and public morality or absence thereof is one and the same. Since politics has become mass politics, the centralised state model of 1861 has proved itself fundamentally inadequate to govern Italy.

Collective identity in Italy has always found its main dimension at local level, in a plethora of small fatherlands, a feeling normally termed *campanilismo*, from the word *campanile*, namely bell tower, the powerful symbol of local identity and continuity with the past. The Italian state, whether monarchical, fascist, or republican has constantly antagonised *campanilismo* and local identities, but has been unable to propose a better identity narrative, if any. This has been a strategic mistake. Instead of fighting the local, Italy should have embraced it and make it productive.

Federalisation as a possible solution

Why does this matter in the corruption discourse? Because if there is any way by which the state can regain a modicum of prestige and credibility in the long run, therefore improving its ability of generating consensus without systematic clientelism, is to enhance popular participation, which is only possible by means of bringing the centre of political decision-making closer to the citizenry, i.e. at local/regional level. The centralised state where decisions are made in Rome is hopelessly discredited and will probably never recover. Rome is as far as a foreign country for the vast majority of Italians in different regions. Although this may sound awkward, it is a common perception within Italy. The best model of governance is paradoxically the one Italy has never adopted, namely federalism. Numerous political forces have recognised the existence of this problem and the value of decentralisation, including (in principle) the recently attempted constitutional reforms by Renzi, but they have been hopelessly unambitious. The best constitutional structure for Italy would be a federation on the Swiss model, with minimal powers for a federal government sitting in some provincial town (Perugia for instance), and all other powers to the region (some regions should perhaps be geographically re-defined), including fiscal policies, education, police, healthcare.

The only way to answer the moral question is a complete overhaul of the current constitution and model of governance, including the symbols of the current Italian state (flag, anthem, and seal), reconnecting the country to its fragmented identity by embracing it. This appears to be, by the way, also one of the few means by which in the (very) long term civil society can be re-constructed. It would also allow the creation of new identity discourses recovering the historical image of the golden age of Italy, namely the late-Middle Ages and Renaissance, when fragmentation was the engine of an astonishing productivity, harnessing inter-regional rivalry and competition.

Will this happen? It is extremely unlikely that a constitutional change in a federalist direction will occur in the lifetime of anybody reading this piece. The current trajectory of the country is precisely the contrary. With the continuous worsening of the economic situation, Italians are systematically embracing narratives of self-deception, according to which cosmetic reforms would bring about a change which changes nothing, particularly perpetuating the long list of acquired rights/privileges on which the current consensus-making system is based, even if it is no longer financially

sustainable. The country is indeed changing, and profoundly, but for the wrong reasons and passively. It endures the change, it does not dominate or steer it, the historical hallmark of bad politics. There is a feedback loop between citizens and elites which continuously reinforces immobilism and self-deception. The vast majority of citizens are not willing to make substantial changes to their lifestyle, as shown by their electoral preferences. Political elites are absolutely unwilling to change either, if not, as mentioned, in cosmetic terms, for fear of losing their party-politics career, and thus seek to strengthen immobilism in their electorate by ideological means. Worse still, Italy's leadership operates in a political-cultural horizon in which strategic initiatives cannot even be conceptualised (a widespread problem within the EU establishment). Besides, reforms which would be required at this juncture in order to fundamentally alter the course of the country, as argued elsewhere, would appear unacceptably draconian and certainly unconstitutional.

Conclusions

The Republic of Italy or effectively Italy as a unified geopolitical entity finds itself today on a trajectory of terminal decline as a modernist experiment. The perspective ahead is unfortunately not one whereby the upcoming financial shocks will finally burst the constraints of an immobilist mentality and a wrong state architecture, but it may paradoxically strengthen them.

The point of Italy's moral question, of clientelism and corruption, even of many forms of organised crime (*mafia*), is not only an ethical and criminal one, but has political origins rooted in the constitutional structure as a centralised state, a model which fails to mobilise the citizens, to enhance civil society, and does not account for the historical conditions of the country. Clientelism and corruption are simple tools for the creation of consensus, which is always a political necessity, in the substantial absence of other mechanisms of consensus-making.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Euro Crisis in the Press blog nor of the London School of Economics.

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