
The Cherries of the Mayor: Degrees of Morality and Responsibility in Local Italian Administration

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Preface

This article originally appeared as a chapter in an edited volume published in 2000 by Berghahn Books.¹ Since this original publication in 2000, I have published several updates on the changes in the Italian electoral system and on new political coalitions.² However, the present republication of the chapter in *Urbanities* has been stimulated by the recognition that the legislative changes and the, at the time “unusual”, political formations analysed here turned out to be precursors of the subsequent major changes that have occurred in the Italian political system, following the so-called *tangentopoli* (kick-back city, or brisbeville) scandals. The events described here, and in particular the analysis on the “double institutionalization of sub-government” are relevant to understanding the continuing turmoil and national government’s instability of post-tangentopoli Italian politics.

Keywords: Political representation, morality, ethics of responsibility, party-rule, *sottogoverno*, Brindisi.

Introduction

This chapter is based on ethnographic material collected in the province of Brindisi between 1987 and 1996. I examine the political changes that occurred during this period and the significance of new laws on administrative decentralisation to local government and politics more generally. I focus on the different responsibilities demanded of the roles of “administrator”, “politician” and “political person” in an attempt to investigate the different loyalties and moralities related to them. This analysis aims to highlight the ways in which the moralities and attitudes to politics of people who occupy public positions have been affected by the central role played by political parties. In particular, a conflict seems to emerge between an impartial, say bureaucratic, sense of responsibility and a committed, political one which in

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² For recent analyses see, for example, Prato, G. B., 2018, “On the Legitimacy of Democratic Representations: Two case studies from Europe”, in I. Pardo and G. B. Prato (eds), *Legitimacy: Ethnographic and Theoretical Insights*, Cham: Palgrave; Prato, G. B., 2018, “Dynamics of Legitimacy: Formal and Informal Contexts”, in I. Pardo and G. B. Prato (eds), *Ethnographers Debate Legitimacy*, special issue of *Urbanities*, Vol.8 (Suppl.1): 9-15 (<https://www.anthrojournal-urbanities.com/vol-8-suppl-1-april-2018/>); and Prato, G. B. 2021, “On Human Stupidity and Economic Policies”, in I. Pardo and G. B. Prato (eds), *Urban Inequalities—Ethnographically Informed Reflections*, Cham: Palgrave, PSUA Series.

turn might as well serve a partisan cause or be directed towards the common good (that is, politics in its noblest meaning). In this sense, Italy is not different from other European countries. However, the Italian ethnography clearly reveals how in contemporary democracy the power of political parties may degenerate to such an extent as to go well beyond formal and, at times, legally recognised limits. The use of such a power through hidden practices of government — known as *sottogoverno* (sub-government) — has culminated into the corruption of the representative system, described as *partitocrazia* (party-ocracy). The observer is, thus, faced with a situation whereby the political system, the legitimacy and stability of which should be safeguarded by the law, has in fact legitimised, and then reproduced, itself on the basis of behaviours, choices and moralities that may be licit to the actors involved, but would not be defined as legitimate by the governed, nor would they always be legal.

Some anthropologists who specialise in non-Western societies might find the last remark objectionable from a perspective anchored to assessing the extent of the institutionalisation of law as a means to social order. Nevertheless, in dealing with this Italian ethnography not only should we recognize that Western societies *do* emphasise this aspect of law; we should also bear in mind that here the political sphere is intrinsically linked to, and indeed legitimised through, the formal legal system. A version of legal positivism has thus subverted the problem of legitimacy as it has been addressed by scholars such as Mosca (1923), who challengingly suggested that in a contemporary democracy power should spring from the authority of the people, and such an authority should be based on moral principles. It follows that rulers cannot justify their power merely through domination, it has to have a legal base as well as moral consent. Hence, legitimacy seems to refer more to shared values than to the application of specific bounding procedures such as, among others, political elections and the formal ways in which the legislative, executive and juridical powers are exercised.

Here, my aim is to understand the principles of the legitimacy granted to sub-government and party-ocracy beyond formal law and the ethical dilemmas attendant to such principles. The anthropological tradition, and micro-level investigation, have been the starting points of my analysis; in particular, the debates on the validity of “legal centralism” as a universal category (see, Nader 1965; also Gluckman 1955) and the institutionalisation of norms (e.g., Bohannan 1965). In the light of these debates, I find stimulating Weber’s discussion of how party practices may influence the development of legal norms and his distinction between the ideal and the actual effectiveness of norms (legal, cultural and social); the former being the concern of jurists, the latter being the object of sociological analysis (Weber 1978).

This Weberian distinction points to a fundamental weakness in a trend developed in political anthropology by transactionalists. In an extensive work (1995), I have suggested that, contrary to their apparently neo-Weberian methodology, the transactionalists’ approach has brought to a head the very logic of “rationality” intrinsic in the “objective laws” of positivism. From such a perspective, although not denying that political choices may be influenced by normative motivations, anthropologists such as Bailey (1969) have maintained that such motivations are a justification for basically pragmatic interests and, therefore, we should

concentrate on the “pragmatic rules”; that is, on the ways in which actors organise themselves in order to establish and maintain control over the available resources. In contrast to such a view, I have suggested that, to focus on the actors’ wheeling and dealing would be as simplistic as dismissing sub-government in terms of political clientelism. If we agree that social facts are not “brute facts” (Lukes 1982), we must address the complex motivations of individuals’ actions beyond sterile methodological individualism. Here, inspired by Leach’s (1964) seminal approach,³ I seek to show that we have much to gain from investigating the “intersubjective” meanings, alongside the meanings individuals give to the social and political situations in which they operate. In trying to understand actors’ manoeuvres beyond the study of their practices, we ought to make sense of the “ethics of responsibility” that informs their political actions (Prato 1995; see also Prato 1993).

Of course, given a system of party-ocracy, any analysis of political action cannot ignore party politics and policies. Similarly, we cannot ignore that the present situation in Western European countries such as Italy is undeniably the offspring of the bureaucratisation of the mass parties masterly studied by Weber at the beginning of the 20th century. Dramatic events and changes have occurred since Weber’s times, but I believe that his work remains important in understanding some aspects of the moralities and responsibilities of the politicians of sub-government. I shall address this question in more detail in a later section. Here, let me point to irrefutable evidence. Across Europe, political parties, faced with the shortcomings of present political systems, have tried to renew themselves but, as the Italian ethnography exemplifies, they have basically failed to construct a credible alternative to the old party-organisation. It seems reasonable, therefore, to wonder whether the present parties actually recognise that this model of party-organisation is no longer viable and that they must do much more than refashion themselves, more or less superficially; they must engage in new forms of political action and organisation that are responsive to the new demands of civil society.

A reading of past Italian events shows that, back in the late 1980s, the aura of legitimacy that the political system had granted to sub-government and party-ocracy began to be questioned by some politicians who wanted to bring together public responsibilities and the different degrees of moralities and loyalties underlying the different roles in politics and administration. This attitude, and widespread discontent among ordinary people, have stirred up recent [in the 1990s] changes. I suggest that these very changes have in fact facilitated the institutionalisation of sub-government and the legal legitimisation of its moral principles.

The ethnography that I discuss in this chapter revolves around the case of D’Antonio, a mayor elected to the city council as an independent candidate on the Communist list.⁴ Such an apparent contradiction is explained by the fact that in Italy all candidates must be attached to a

³ I refer in particular to Leach’s attention to the subjective motivations of social action.

⁴ In 1991, the Italian Communist party (PCI) changed its logo and name to Democratic Party of the Left (PDS), later renamed again as Democrats of the Left (DS). A radical fringe renamed itself as Communist Refoundation.

formally registered electoral list.⁵ D’Antonio says that he accepted the Communists’ offer because he loved the city and thought that the solution to local problems could come from good administration of local resources. In spite of a disappointing experience as mayor, D’Antonio remains convinced that he would be a good administrator if only he had the right people around him and could avoid being restricted by party politics and by politicking.

D’Antonio identifies as a major asset in his approach to politics his ability to speak to all parties across the spectrum. His attitude seems to respond more to the role of “political person” than to that of “politician”. In its restricted meaning, the latter can be described as the party bureaucrat, the person of apparatus who lives *off* politics, whereas the political person would rather live *for* politics through personal engagement. These roles, and the attendant ethics of responsibility do indeed conflict. For D’Antonio, personal responsibility should be the foundation of good administration. On such grounds, he claims that, had he to choose, his priority would be a city mayoralty and not a seat in parliament — he feels that, given the system of party-ocracy, as an MP he would be a man of apparatus, the representative of a party, and not the representative of the people who elected him. Significantly, however, not long after his experience as mayor, he was elected to parliament as a candidate for the PDS (see footnote 3) and occupied relevant positions in parliamentary commissions that controlled crucial areas of the enquiries on political corruption. It is, however, his role in local government that raises interesting issues of legitimacy and morality in the political field.

Party-rule and (Hidden) Government in Italy

Since the formation of the Italian Republic in 1946, the major parties (that is, the Christian Democrat, the Communist and the Socialist parties) that participated in drafting the Constitution have supported administrative decentralisation, as a necessary measure to break the centralist tradition of the Italian State established by the post-Unification Jacobean government and enforced by Fascism. The territorial decentralisation of administration (which is regulated by Art. 117 of the Italian Constitution) has been expressed through the formation of secondary institutions — the *Regioni* (regions) — which can, in turn, delegate their administrative functions to *Province* (provinces) and *Comuni* (municipalities).

However, it has been widely argued that the subordination of every aspect of government to political parties’ interests has thwarted genuine self-government. In June 1990, a new law on local autonomies (Law 14-6-1990 No. 142) became effective. Law 142 was part of a wider strategy against party-ocracy. In theory, party-ocracy, intended as a degeneration of the representative system, responds to the historical transformation of the Liberal state which, according to Weber (1978), is inevitably linked to the bureaucratization of mass parties. Power has increasingly shifted from the representative body (the Parliament) to the political parties,

⁵ Each list includes a number of candidates up to the number of seats available in the council. Before the 1993 reforms, these lists also included (independent) non-party members, and the mayor had to be an elected city councillor appointed to the office by the City Council. Now, the mayor is elected directly by the people.

which should democratically regulate the election of such a representative body. MPs have thus ceased to be the representatives of the citizens, becoming instead the delegates of specific party factions, or of interests that are not always strictly political.

In Italy, the relationship between party-ocracy and sub-government is a complex one. Differently, say, from the US model, the Italian situation has been complicated by the system of proportional representation, now operating in a revised form,⁶ and the attendant nature of government coalitions in which minor parties also participated. One observable result of the growing electoral strength of these minor parties in the early 1980s was that the resources to be distributed became a bargaining tool used by political actors to pre-empt opposition. However, very rarely has such an illegitimate use of resources brought about suborning, for very rarely has it been set in simple, asymmetrical relations of power; even at local level, it has been part of a complex situation marked by a negotiated mutual agreement, among parties, in the formation of ruling coalitions. This situation closely reminds us of Weber's (1978) description of how compromise between different interest groups becomes the rule, and each group is likely to obtain benefits. Decision-making then occurs at a sub-government level.

The Italian political scientist Bobbio (1983) has described the connection between "proper government" and "sub-government" as twofold. On the one hand, it has involved what in Italy is known as *lottizzazione* (allotment), that is the negotiated distribution among political parties of key positions in the public sector and also in banks, credit institutions, the media and semi-public corporations. On a more general level, it has also involved the secret funding of the political parties, as a consequence of the dealings of these party-appointed personnel in procuring financial resources for the parties.⁷ Thus, far from being opposed to the rationale of party-ocracy, sub-government has been instrumental in strengthening precisely the power of the political parties, including those outside of government. The latter have benefited from sub-government through participation in parliamentary commissions endowed with legislative power which, since the mid-1960s, have become increasingly crucial to decision-making. Moreover, non-governmental parties may have considerable power and be in the executives of local administrations, including the regional assembly, and the province and city councils. These processes have significantly influenced different approaches to politics and local administration, as well as different — at times opposing — loyalties and senses of responsibility.

Private Interests, Morality and Clean Politics

During the 1980s, apart from recurrent problems of unemployment and industrial redevelopment, Brindisi administrators and politicians were faced with widespread calls for morality in public office.

⁶ The new electoral system of the early-1990s included both majority (first past the post) and proportional selections. Elsewhere, I explain in detail this new system (Prato 1995).

⁷ Following the 1993 referenda, new rules have been introduced on the funding of political parties.

Politicians from major parties argued that unemployment could be solved through the government programme of development of energy resources implemented in the early 1980s, which also extended to the province of Brindisi. In contrast to such hopes, various protest groups opposed the decision to build a power-station in the area. Among these were environmental groups and some Catholics who had long opposed various development policies in the South. Concern with the environment was, they said, only one aspect of the protest; above all, pointing to links between economic policies and instrumental political interests, they appointed themselves as the champions of “clean politics”, in opposition to party-ocracy. Believing that an institutional role would give them a better chance at succeeding in their task, they formed an electoral list named “Catholic and Lay People for Change” (CLC) and, in 1985, won two of the forty seats on the city council. Such an outcome was not totally unexpected, as local events did seem to give them some ground on which to base their claims.

Many Brindisini had bitterly resented the fact that, in 1984, a government commissioner had to be appointed to run Brindisi city council. This practice, known as *commissariamento*, occurs whenever a public or administrative institution (e.g., city council, province council or local health authority) cannot be governed by the appointed or elected body of councillors. In the case of the city council, it is the local prefect (i.e., the state’s representative in the province) who decides whether the appointment of a commissioner is necessary, and then makes a formal request to the Home Secretary. In Brindisi, *commissariamento* followed the arrest of the mayor, who had been accused of abuse of power and embezzlement of funds; among other things, the accusations were motivated by the fact that he had granted the use of city council funds without the necessary approval of the council.⁸ The way in which the city council executive had managed the power-station affair was also questioned with an emphasis on the events that led to an agreement, in 1984, between the executive and ENEL — the State Electricity Board responsible for the construction of the power-station. Following the council’s acceptance of the plant in 1983, protest groups seized the city hall. Undeterred, the mayor and a few *assessori* (members of the executive) went on to sign the agreement with ENEL in a storehouse in the industrial area; political opponents denied institutional validity to the agreement which was labelled as *patto baracca* (the hut agreement).

In those days, D’Antonio did not occupy a political or administrative position; however, on account of his reputation as a highly regarded professional, he had often contributed to the local political debate. Now, he proposed the formation of a “technical” executive that would include representatives of all parties elected to the city council — given the probability of *commissariamento*, in which all would lose out, just for once each party would thus have to be responsible for the administration of the city. He also argued that a councillor who could be regarded as being *super partes* would be the right choice as mayor, and suggested a Christian

⁸ Before the 1993 electoral reforms, the city council was administered through an executive made up of elected councillors, who in theory were appointed to the role of *assessori* (members of the executive) by the mayor. All the actions of the executive had, however, to be approved by a majority of the city councillors.

Democrat politician who, however, was opposed by locally powerful party comrades because of his public criticism of their administrative malpractice. Eventually, Brindisi failed to avoid the *commissariamento*. This encouraged the protest groups to form their own electoral list and motivated the Communists to ask D'Antonio to stand as a candidate on their list, despite their compromised position concerning the power-station, which they had accepted as unavoidable.

Throughout the 1980s the activity of Brindisi city council focused mainly on the construction of the power-station and, to a lesser but significant extent, on the redevelopment of existing industries. The opposition carried out by CLC councillors on juridical and legal grounds contributed to force several changes in the executive.⁹ At the end of 1986, little more than a year after the election, the appointed executive led by a Socialist mayor was forced to resign. The following spring, a new coalition was put together, including Christian Democrats, Communists and Republicans. The exclusion of the Socialists was reluctantly accepted by the Christian Democrats and Republicans. D'Antonio became mayor, but his office was destined to be short-lived.

At that time, the formal procedure still demanded that the mayor be nominated by the city council. He would then form the executive, selecting the *assessori* from among the elected councillors (see footnotes 5 and 8). The actual practice was quite different. In this case, after months of meetings and failed negotiations, the three parties that eventually reached an agreement were determined to choose as mayor a competent person with a high moral reputation. Not only did these three parties need to send a message to the city, they also knew that their coalition absolutely needed the support of the CLC in order to survive. Many saw in D'Antonio the best, though in many ways most problematic, choice. D'Antonio was too independent and, on some occasions, had opposed Communist policy. A way around his independence was to exclude him from the selection of the *assessori*. Of course, the parties provided justification for every single choice, stressing that the proposed *assessori* were all trustworthy people, meaning, as D'Antonio fully recognised, that these people could be trusted to counterbalance his "independence". As for the CLC, some activists branded the coalition as an expression of political opportunism. However, as the coalition parties had hoped, the involvement of a person like D'Antonio did help to persuade senior members to compromise and give their support, while continuing to preach "morality" and "clean politics".

The Maid and the Cherries. Degrees of Morality, Trust and Responsibility

On becoming mayor, D'Antonio addressed the executive with a metaphorical speech about his expectations of, and attitude towards, a hypothetical maid. He started by saying that if he had a maid, he would expect a basic degree of proper behaviour and honesty from her, for he believed that both parties would benefit from a relationship based on reciprocal trust. On such grounds, if he, for instance, had guests to supper and asked the maid to buy the best quality cherries, he could expect three possible, very different outcomes. First, the good quality of the shopping

⁹ At that time, the resignation of the executive did not necessarily bring about a new election, but usually led to a new agreement that might exclude some of the old allies.

and the reasonable amount of money spent would confirm that he had not misplaced his trust. Second, the maid would, disappointingly, return home with indisputably low-quality fruit and say that she had expensively bought the best on the market. Third, the quality of the shopping would meet his expectation but the maid would claim a sudden increase in price, in fact implying that she had pocketed some of the money. In this last case, though still disappointed, he would consider the possible reasons for such a behaviour before passing judgement. She might have been in need of the money. Of course, she should have talked to him, but he would somehow be inclined to turn a blind eye to the episode if no third parties were going to suffer from her misbehaviour, and if she usually acted in good faith and, more generally, fulfilled responsibly her duties. D'Antonio did not need, nor was he asked, to explain the moral of the story. Some local politicians later commented that they hoped he really had meant what he had said, and did not expect them to act in accord with the first hypothesis in his parable. Given the widespread use (and abuse) of sub-government dealings, D'Antonio clearly took a non-naive view of the gradation of (moral) corruption, beyond the strictly legal definition and was not expecting that outcome either.¹⁰ Nevertheless, he made a point during his mayoralty of showing by his own actions, symbolic and practical, that it was possible to act primarily in the public interest of the city, even though such an attitude would cost him financial losses and have negative effects on his private life.

D'Antonio tried to prove his point in various ways. To start with, breaking with tradition, he and his family did not make a private use of the official car assigned to the mayor. Moreover, having repeatedly been picked on by local traffic wardens, he decided to travel by public transport. Interestingly, traffic wardens are a sort of municipal police and the mayor is their highest superior. D'Antonio had asked for their cooperation in trying to re-establish a relationship of trust with Brindisini. He suggested that the image of the city and the smooth running of its services depended primarily on the way in which the official representatives of the city, at all levels, performed their duties.

What D'Antonio was asking for was a “not-too-high degree of responsibility”, including avoiding unjustified absence from work and providing swift responses to the needs of the city. In return, he kept his promise to listen to people's demands and discontent. Many local politicians, including his Communist friends, criticised his readiness to meet people¹¹ and argued that he did not need to spend so much time in his office. Soon rumours also spread that he was not pocketing the usual 10 per cent kickback that contractors for public works were allegedly expected to pay in order to obtain contracts. After a few months, many Brindisini began to feel that the city had finally found the right mayor. People stopped D'Antonio in the street to congratulate him; the traffic wardens who had initially opposed him began to

¹⁰ This kind of morality was later broadly translated into law with adverse implications in terms of legitimacy which have been addressed in recent works (Miller 1998). On political corruption as a classical issue, see Schafer 1974.

¹¹ Pardo (1993) has analysed this Communist attitude in relation to their administrative experience in Naples.

cooperate. Communist rank-and-file supported him, and senior politicians from other parties made it clear that they held him in high regard. The council executive seemed to cooperate, though not always willingly. Many council bureaucrats, including those who had obtained their jobs through political parties, acknowledged the more efficient running of the municipal institutions. Yet, in spite of such an apparently overwhelming success, after little more than a year, D'Antonio had to resign. Some of the events and motivations that led to his resignation are relevant to our analysis.

Ethics of political negotiation

As I mentioned above, throughout the 1980s the activity of the Brindisi city council focused mainly on the power-station affair. It was inevitable that, as soon as the executive led by D'Antonio took office, the CLC began to press for a meeting with the central government in order to discuss, and settle, that complex situation. After two disappointing meetings with government representatives, it became clear that, in spite of D'Antonio's observable investments in moral authority and good will, his policy was bound to fall very short of the CLC's expectations.

Paradoxically, D'Antonio's stress on his mayoral duty to safeguard the interests of *all* citizens contributed to his moral image as a good administrator, but proved tactically damaging. His non-“political” commitment, his show of competence in tackling complex situations, his integrity, his devotion to the mayoral office and constant relationship with the people and, most importantly, his understanding of their problems also made him a symbolic representative of the city. This granted him legitimacy well beyond his institutional role. For many people D'Antonio represented *Brindisinità*; that is, local historically rooted values and culture. Some of his opponents branded his independence from party politics as a form of (palatable) authoritarianism, but this argument cut little ice among ordinary people. Brindisini had long experienced commitment to party politics in the form of partisan attitudes, political favouritism, party interests overriding administrative duty — all of which conflicted with their idea of legitimacy. Yet, these elements, among others, formed the actual basis for accountability in sub-government. Even the CLC's members, while preaching clean politics, succumbed to the logic of sub-government, stating that they had been betrayed by D'Antonio, the very man in whom they had put their hopes. In their bitterness, the CLC found instrumental support in some politicians across the political spectrum who, having failed to counterbalance D'Antonio's independence, wanted to reinstate a more traditional coalition, one that would work according to the rules of sub-government and party-ocracy.

The resignation of a Republican *assessore* was the first step towards the fall of that executive. This person can be described as a contemporary version of the “amateur politician” (in the sense of Weber's *nebenberufliche*, 1974); he is also a successful entrepreneur who tries to extract non-political benefits from the power that may spring from his political activity. His reasons for deserting D'Antonio are interesting.

During that period, significant changes had been proposed in the presidency of the Apulian Chambers of Commerce (CoCs). Apulian CoCs had traditionally been Christian Democrat strongholds. This *assessore* knew, however, that the national leaderships of the five parties in central government (a coalition known as *pentapartito* and including Christian Democrats, Republicans, Social Democrats, Socialists and Liberals) had agreed that the Christian Democrats would relinquish the presidency of a CoC in favour of the Socialists or the Republicans, and that the Brindisi CoC was the most negotiable one. Such a concession would have to be compensated in some way, and the negotiations would also have to satisfy the other parties involved. A relevant role was to be played by the Socialists who gave priority to marginalising the Communists from local government because the latter had masterminded their exclusion from the city council executive.

The negotiations over the control of the Brindisi CoC evolved around social and political networks which included mainly Socialists and Republicans. It was eventually agreed that in exchange for the presidency, the Republicans would withdraw from the city executive in order to reintroduce a *pentapartito* coalition. A Christian Democrat would be appointed as the new mayor. The Socialists would not only rejoin the executive, but were reassured that they would benefit from the Republican presidency in the CoC. Meanwhile the Communists mounted a vilifying campaign in their local newspaper against the Republican candidate to the CoC presidency. Eventually, the editor of the newspaper was accused of libel and a leading member of the local Communist secretariat was appointed as councillor in the governing body of the Brindisi CoC.

D'Antonio did not feel so much betrayed by all this politicking as by the Communist Party's actions and withdrawal of support. The Communists had always claimed to oppose party-ocracy; yet, at the time of these events many in the rank-and-file began questioning whether the highly praised democratic centralism was itself a form of party-ocracy. Reflecting ordinary's people ideas of legitimacy, during a party meeting, a long-standing member suggested that the party should regard as a party-ocratic practice the appointment of party bureaucrats who were powerful in the party secretariat, to positions of administrative responsibility in public institutions.¹² Predictably, that line of argument found no support among the party notables, who claimed that the decadence of the political system was due precisely to the lack of party discipline, adding that the present situation was largely explained by the too independent, therefore *irresponsible*, attitude of people like D'Antonio.

D'Antonio concedes that, although he had always tried to act both in accordance with the law and in fulfilment of people's moral expectations, his deeds were denied legitimacy by the parties, which had instead acted in accordance with the moral principles of sub-government. Through his parable about the maid, he had tried to make it clear that he was aware of the different responsibilities faced by individuals who are at once both party bureaucrats and

¹² Abrahams and Bukurura (1993) have addressed this aspect in relation to Tanzania, showing how a Communist-style bureaucracy has led to a predominance of the party leadership over democratic institutions, often at the expense of the elected parliament.

institutional representatives, and that he was aware that different roles demanded different loyalties and moralities. Therefore, he expected conflicts to arise as members of the executive were faced with the choice of being institutional administrators or “politicians”, or, in what he described as the noblest hypothesis, individuals who had chosen to dedicate themselves to politics and to the law in order to guarantee social order and the common good. Of course, he was also aware that the boundaries between such different moralities and responsibilities are not always clearly defined.

In all his will to be a good “political man”, D’Antonio failed to recognise that, in this situation, his stress on independence and *personal* responsibility might well have made him accountable to ordinary citizens but, crucially, it made him broadly unaccountable to the parties that were supporting him. Following Weber (1978), we might suggest that D’Antonio was challenging the stability of an established “convention” which did not need the enforcement of law in order to be legitimate in the eyes of the individuals who practised it. As such a “convention” was recognised as “binding”, it had to be protected against violation or deviation. Disapproval was the initial sanction against D’Antonio. Boycott on the part of his allies was his final punishment. In spite of such ostracism, D’Antonio continued to act in accordance with his conception of morality and personal responsibility, while opposing the ethics of responsibility expressed by the politics of sub-government.

Morality, legality and ethics of responsibility

The new council executive that was formed in 1989 included all the *pentapartito* parties. It lasted with much difficulty until the end of that legislature (March 1990) and was subjected to magistracy enquiries. For instance, in August 1989 the new mayor signed a new agreement with the central government regarding the power-station. Not only did this move fail to deliver what it promised, opposition groups also succeeded in providing evidence to the Regional Administrative Tribunal that led to the prosecution of the mayor and four *assessori* on the charge of pursuing private interests through public office. This added to the ongoing enquiry involving Republican and Communist city councillors who had been accused of having acted unlawfully. As members of the city council building commission, they had signed a building permit for the construction of the power-station, despite having a private interest in the project; they were either owners or shareholders in some of the contracting firms. It was argued that they should also have refrained from attending the city council meetings during which the crucial decisions were taken on the project. It is worth mentioning that the so-called “clean hands enquiries” were yet to come. In this situation, the mayor and the four prosecuted *assessori* did not feel threatened by the enquiries. They did not resign and, in spite of negative media coverage, the following December proceeded to push the August agreement through the city council, arguing that it was their institutional responsibility to do so. At the December council meeting, D’Antonio argued for morally, as well as legally, acceptable behaviour in a speech that was regarded as highly embarrassing not only for those in power, but also for a significant portion of the opposition. The main items on the agenda were the ratification of the agreement

and the resignation of the prosecuted mayor and *assessori*. As time limits were unexpectedly imposed, D'Antonio managed to complete his "long political" and "juridical" harangue only after a right-wing politician, an MSI councillor,¹³ made time for him by giving up his own speech. Having stressed that, in signing the August agreement, the mayor had betrayed the will of the council, D'Antonio pressed on, pointing out that he should also have resigned because other members of the executive were being legally prosecuted. He argued that the action of the mayor and his *assessori* made them either dishonest or incompetent and, therefore, unsuitable to govern. In either case, they had a moral and civil obligation to resign. Instead, they had shown an "undignified attachment to their seats" putting the whole city council into a very awkward position. The council could not press charges against them because, legally, the mayor and the *assessori* cannot act against themselves. On the other hand, should the city council fail to act, it would be legally liable for neglect of duty. D'Antonio's point was that, under the circumstances, a solution could only be found legally, *not* politically, and that this would be possible only by getting round party discipline.

The August agreement was eventually ratified with the support of the Communists, then formally in opposition. Only thirty councillors out of forty participated in the ballot. Eight voted against the agreement; including the three MSI councillors, one CLC councillor (the other had already left, thus weakening the credibility of their opposition), D'Antonio and three Christian Democrats, one of whom had been bitterly opposed by party comrades during the meeting. The Liberal councillor abstained. The reasons given by those who voted in favour and their subsequent actions are most revealing. The Republican group leader pointed out that the ratification had passed thanks to the Communists' support, which he regarded as an act of administrative responsibility. However, he continued, the Republicans would demand an enquiry on the executive's activities and, of course, its resignation. This was an astute move in view of the forthcoming election, because by demanding an enquiry into a coalition of which they were part, they stressed that their *assessore* was a "clean" politician. Less straightforwardly, the Socialists said that they had supported the agreement not because they wanted to support the executive (of which they also were part), but because they felt a moral commitment towards their electors. They would support the Republicans' request for a "political" enquiry but they felt that, as the construction of the power-station would continue regardless of what happened to the present executive, there was no point in causing a political crisis and further disruption to the administration of the city. The Communists did not expand much on the motivations they had given during the debate. They had criticised at length the mayor and the executive, and had demanded their resignation, while arguing that this was not the moment to indulge in "political terrorism" of the kind practised by the MSI and CLC. In particular, they described the CLC's position as political blackmail, cunningly disguised through claims of ethical, political and juridical righteousness. Tellingly, most of the

¹³ Through a process similar to that of the Communists', the MSI (Italian Social Movement) later became Alleanza Nazionale (National Alliance) leaving behind a radical fringe, the Movimento Sociale (Social Movement), which was parallel to Communist Refoundation.

councillors who had demanded the resignation of the mayor and the executive began to leave the hall, rather noisily, as the mayor made clumsy attempts to speak. He was therefore forced to declare that the second item on the agenda could not be discussed because the number of attendees was legally insufficient. The second item, we know, was the “no-confidence motion against the mayor”. Thus, while their messages were apparently directed at the public, hinting that they had acted in the interests of their electorate, in fact their speeches and actions aimed at assuring old, and potential new, partners in sub-government that they all shared the same sense of loyalty and responsibility. Very soon, widespread debate on the old party structure would induce a readjustment of some aspects of the system of sub-government. In fact, as we shall see, it seems only to have grazed the party oligarchic power.

Morals of Oligarchy vs Personal Responsibility

This Brindisi ethnography shows that local Communists were not unfamiliar with sub-government. However, they had always stressed that, in contrast to the other parties that lacked internal discipline, their beyond-the-party networks were used — in the terms of sub-government — on behalf of the party, not for personal gains. Thus, the party leadership encouraged ordinary members to develop social networks that were not strictly party-centred and to keep a low profile on the nature of the relations on which they were constructed. Social networks became, however, problematic resources when they escaped the party’s control, as in the case of D’Antonio, who was supported by most rank-and-file and young members, but was “benevolently” criticised by senior Communists.

By the end of the 1980s, young activists had singled out the party’s involvement in sub-government as a main cause of the widening gap between the party and the broader society. It is now known that throughout 1989 and 1990, the Italian Communists debated how to change the party’s name and logo in ways that would reflect changes in their political philosophy.¹⁴ They saw the 1990 administrative election as a testing ground for a new party organisation and for an alliance with non-Communist political actors. Once again, D’Antonio embodied their passport to credibility in such changes. This local trial run concretised in the formation of an “open” electoral list which included the Communists, a number of independents led by D’Antonio, and the Catholic group that had, meanwhile, dissociated from the CLC. In accordance with the new image stressed by the PCI in the 1989 statute, the electoral list was discussed among party members, including the rank-and-file, before it was officially presented to the electorate. In spite of widespread substantial disagreement from the floor, the party leadership imposed its choices.

This is not the place to discuss in detail the way in which the electoral campaign was carried out. It will suffice to say that, while the list was presented to the electorate as the list of the mayor D’Antonio, some party members who were candidates on the same list manoeuvred against him. Not only did such a boycott betray the spirit of the “open” list, it also ran counter

¹⁴ Anthropological analyses can be found in Pardo (1993) and Prato (1995). For an early account see Ignazi (1990).

to the guidelines set in the party's statute, whereby Communist candidates are expected to "conduct the electoral campaign without indulging in personal propaganda" and to "behave loyally towards their comrades in the list". D'Antonio was elected. However, his serious reservations about the Communists' behaviour later concretised in his resignation from the city councillorship. Various attempts were made to persuade him to desist from such a line of action, including the suggestion that he was the list's only possible nominee for an eventual mayoralty. This exemplifies the conflictual relationship D'Antonio has had with the Communist party, and later with the PDS. On the one hand, he says he is dissatisfied with the overwhelming power of party bureaucrats and, now and then, considers leaving active politics. On the other hand, he feels that being a "political man", he cannot help his need to be involved and, identifying himself as basically left-wing, feels unable to sever his link with the party.

In 1992, a momentary peace agreement was established as D'Antonio, now a member of the PDS, was asked to stand as a candidate for parliament. D'Antonio conceded that the proposal flattered his vanity. More seriously, he thought that this experience might be useful in case he ever decided to return to local politics. His candidature was so vehemently opposed by some senior members as to force a general vote. The D'Antonio candidature passed comfortably, but this did not deter his opponents. Fearing the power he might acquire as an MP, they accused him of continuing to act as an "independent" and put forward an alternative candidate, who was more experienced in parliamentary affairs. Other comrades believed, instead, that D'Antonio was the right person to contain the party's loss of consent; with him, the party would have a chance to win "by betting on the person". The electoral results proved them right. Not only was he elected, but his candidature was also instrumental in helping to elect a "truly party man", who was earmarked to serve in important parliamentary commissions but whose attitude and political choices had alienated the support of many Brindisini, giving the party reason to fear that he would not be elected on his own.

In theory, this kind of electoral agreement is no longer possible. Since 1992, the procedures for holding parliamentary and administrative elections have changed several times. These reforms have claimed to meet Italians' desire for real change. However, recent events contradict such a claim. The following section outlines the ways in which the changes introduced after the enquiries into political corruption have in fact institutionalised sub-government, giving a new face-lift to the powers of party-ocracy.

Institutional reforms, or the institutionalisation of sub-government

Among the changes introduced by the post-1992 institutional reforms, there are those related to the election of the mayor and the city council. They are a further development of the aforementioned law 142 on local autonomies of 1990. We know that one of the aims of this law was to guarantee more balanced relations between local administration and central government beyond the parties' control. At the same time, it aimed at safeguarding people's participation in decision-making against abuses of power.

A first law regulating administrative elections was passed in January 1992. According to this, people who had been legally prosecuted and found guilty of crimes related, amongst other things, to corruption and actions against the interests of the state and its citizens could not be elected to public office. It also stated that should such crimes be committed by a politician elected to office, he or she should be immediately suspended. This move met people's expectations in a situation in which politicians' attitudes had also in part changed. As we have seen, only three years earlier, a corrupt officer's staying on was regarded as illegitimate and morally wrong only by ordinary people and a very few politicians. Now, following the enquiries into corruption, many prosecuted administrators would not easily contemplate staying in office, regardless of whether this would constitute a breach of law.

Another relevant change was introduced by the law passed in March 1993, regulating the direct election of the mayor. This new law, along with law 142, gives almost absolute powers to the mayor and to the executive, now no longer composed of elected politicians. While in the past the *assessori* were chosen among the elected councillors, now the two roles are incompatible; in the event that a city councillor is appointed to the executive, he or she has to relinquish the councillorship. This rule is meant to avoid conflict between a position that is still inevitably linked to a political party, and an office that is supposed to be beyond party politics and that should bring about that sense of responsibility so dear to people like D'Antonio. However, the reality of the present situation is very different from the theorised model. Before looking again at the ethnography, let me point out some aspects of the new law that are relevant here.

This idea of an independent executive could make one wonder whether, as some new mayors have claimed, the office of mayor should also be regarded as having purely administrative status. In fact, the position is inevitably political, as the new law demands candidates to the mayoralty to be linked to one, or more than one, electoral lists. These lists, in turn, can be made up by established or newly formed political parties. In order to be elected, a candidate must obtain an absolute majority. In the event that no candidate manages to do so, the two candidates with most votes go through a second ballot and are allowed to seek the backing of other lists in addition to those that had originally supported them. The party, or coalition of parties, that supports the winning candidate gets 60 per cent of the council seats. The remaining seats are distributed among the lists or coalitions that obtain enough votes to elect at least one councillor, and their unelected candidates to the mayoralty are entitled by right to the councillorship.

Given these new rules, on the occasion of the 1994 city council election, Brindisi experienced the formation of fifteen different electoral lists. There were nine candidates to the mayoralty, most of whom had formed their own electoral list after failing to lead those of established parties or of other newly formed political groups. In many cases, these people knew that they would not be elected as mayor, but hoped to get enough votes to become city councillors. The PDS formed a coalition with a conservative fringe of the Catholic electorate, thus forcing its previous Catholic partners to split and return to the old alliance with the

environmentalists. D'Antonio did not present his candidature either as mayor or as councillor. The PDS had initially proposed him as candidate to the mayoralty. However, the idea was abandoned during the “preparatory” (read: bargaining) meetings with the new Catholic allies, in which he was made to play a very marginal role. During these meetings, the point was stressed that the candidate needed to be a respectable and capable professional but also someone perceived by the people as being outside politics. In particular, the Catholics wanted someone young, who could not possibly have a long political history. D'Antonio turned down the support of other lists, some of which had been formed by splinter members of the PDS, vaguely explaining that he did not want to campaign against the PDS. The candidate of the PDS-led coalition was elected as mayor after a second run ballot against the candidate of Berlusconi's newly formed party, Forza Italia, which in Brindisi was initially a rather disorganised group.

As an immediate advantage, the new procedure would appear to guarantee a certain stability of the executive — which is expected to last until the end of the legislature — and therefore a smooth running of the administration. In the past, it could take months to form the executive and, should it resign, more months would elapse before a new one would be formed. Now, its formation must be accomplished within a restricted time limit and, in the event of resignation, a new election must be called. As a consequence, all the agreements that in the past were taken at a sub-government level are now bargained in advance, but the logic and rules seem to have remained the same. The main difference would be that, apart from being regarded as morally legitimate by the political actors involved, the pre- and post-electoral compromises are also given an aura of legality.

Thus, sub-government has become, in a sense, institutionalised. Bohannan's hypothesis (1965) of the double institutionalisation of norms may help to understand this new Italian situation. For Bohannan, as for Weber (1978), the diffusion of a conduct among a plurality of individuals will inevitably lead to a consensual understanding. For Weber, however, such a consensus is not by itself law. From the Weberian perspective, the necessity to introduce new rules of law is mainly explained with the emergence of new lines of conduct that challenge the established consensus; in our case, we think of the attitudes of people like D'Antonio (for other forms of “challenging activities”, see Prato 1995). In such a situation, there may be individuals who would favour change either to protect their interests, thus altering the external conditions in which they operate, or to promote them more effectively under existing conditions (Weber 1978). The Italian changes seem to be a result of the first possibility envisioned by Weber. More interesting, however, Bohannan (1965) has argued that a shared conduct becomes institutionalised, and therefore “legally” binding, when such a conduct starts losing consensus. Taking Bohannan's analysis further, we could say that, although sub-government was certainly not losing consensus among political parties, the moral opposition to it expressed in civil society seriously threatened its survival. Thus, while political parties start to preach “revolutionary changes” (which the “clean hands” enquiries were supposed to bring about), the rules of sub-government have eventually been enforced by law, thus becoming institutionalised. In any case,

as recent events in Brindisi and throughout Italy show, local administrations continue to experience a high degree of instability.

As soon as Brindisi's new mayor was in office, he made choices that ran counter to his allies' expectations. The compromise that led to that alliance also involved the appointments in the executive. The mayor, however, did not entirely conform to the agreement and, as soon as the executive was formally appointed, the PDS councillors started their opposition. After repeated mayoral resignations and their subsequent withdrawals, in January 1996, the executive was dissolved and a new election was called for the following June. D'Antonio now decided to present his own list. Following the events surrounding the 1994 election, he had become determined to set up what he calls a "movement of political training". He had cultivated this idea for a long time, and now felt that the right moment had arrived to put it into practice. The movement, he said, was meant to "discuss" politics, rather than "simply act" in the political arena; it aimed at involving people in the street, not just intellectuals, the ultimate goal being to influence public opinion towards a moral approach to politics which, however, remained undefined. An ear of wheat was adopted as the logo for the movement in order to stress the individuality of each member — symbolised by the kernels — while suggesting that unity (of the spike) could be achieved only through the common effort of all individuals. It would therefore be a "movement of democratic unity".

In spite of his conflictual relationship with the PDS, D'Antonio was confident that, eventually, the party would support him, not because it would feel morally compelled to do so, but because it might just feel compelled by a sense of political responsibility. Should such support not materialise, D'Antonio envisioned three possibilities. He would win at the first round. The candidate of the right coalition would, instead, win at the first round (a likely possibility in the changed political climate of Brindisi). Finally, he and the right-wing candidate would have to ballot the candidature at the second round. The first and second possibilities left little space for manoeuvre and, D'Antonio said, should he win, the only responsible thing the PDS could do would be to support him in the city council — their opposition, he envisioned, would further damage their image because many in Brindisi deemed them responsible for the city administrative and political crisis. The third possibility, concerning a second ballot, would put the PDS in a more complex situation; at such a juncture, the only way for them to come out morally clean would be to support him, for, should they fail to do so, they could be blamed for the victory of the right. Eventually, the PDS supported D'Antonio's candidature, but the candidate of the right won the election. To many Brindisini, the "democratic unity" of D'Antonio's movement was too closely reminiscent of Communist "democratic centralism". Moreover, while the parties of the right capitalised on previous experience and supported a single candidate, those of the left presented different candidates, ending up fighting each other. In Brindisi, many believed that fragmentation among the Left, and the PDS's policies and shifting alliances across the political spectrum, at local and national levels, provided powerful explanations for this recent electoral result.

Distortions of Responsibility, Trust and Accountability

It has been suggested that a system of proportional representation such as Italy's leads to the rulers' loss of sense of responsibility because in such a system it is difficult to distinguish between those who, nominally, govern and those who, nominally, are the opposition. While for a long time these parties have been formally out of government, they have participated in sub-government, thus strengthening the "negative power" of the parties; that is, the power of blocking action. In such a scenario, the morals of politicking seem to prevail over those of responsible, and trustable, politics.

In our analysis of a system that is said to have changed from a parliamentary democracy to a party-ocracy, we should ask which ideals of state and representation Italian politicians bring into existence through their actions. If we agree with Weber (1974) that the politician's action is characterised by partisan spirit, we ought also to agree that responsibility towards a particularistic cause would be the ultimate guide of such action. Moreover, if we accept that a major inner satisfaction in politics lies in the sense of power, we might as well suggest that, apart from the acquisition of personal power, in a party-ocratic system developed in response to the original weakness of the parties, the cause to be served is the acquisition of power — electoral and political — for one's own party. In Italy, as the power of the executive body (i.e., the government) is constitutionally subordinated to the parliamentary representatives (who in fact are party representatives), the observable outcome of such an approach to politics has been that the rules of sub-government have become dominant.

Perversely, politicians who dutifully serve "the cause" tend to justify their actions by ethical guidelines according to which if they do not act as required by the rules of sub-government someone else will, and such *other* persons might well happen to belong to a different (probably opposite) party. Politicians of sub-government gladly fulfil their duties, not only because a different course of action would be disadvantageous to them but also because, as Weber makes us note, "its violation would be abhorrent" to their very sense of duty (Weber 1978: 31). Thus, the stability of the system seems to rely on the awareness of the individuals involved that as long as the people with whom they interact continue to uphold those rules and conform with the attendant ethics, disobedience will bring about sanctions and inconveniences. Thus, it is deemed to be proper, "responsible" behaviour to act accordingly and serve the cause of one's party, of one's allies and, maybe, also of one's electorate. Thus, not only does the party system seem to have blurred the separation of the three fundamental powers of contemporary democracy — executive, legislative and juridical powers — (see Pardo 2000); it has also affected the very idea of a political system based on civil rights. Political power should promote, respect and safeguard these rights; paradoxically, the party power seems to be directed against these very rights.

Here, we have seen that responsibility to one's party (or faction) and its allies in sub-government is an essential aspect in this party-ocratic system. Furthermore, we know that party-ocracy has extended the control of the political parties over public affairs. In this situation, the bureaucratic and administrative structures seem to have failed to become separated from the

processes of public political competition; thus, such a “political responsibility” had to be extended to these arenas too. This is important because, contrary to what is prescribed by the Constitution, in this party-ocracy civil servants, especially in ministerial offices, cease to be at the “exclusive service of the nation” (Italian Constitution: Art. 98); and, as they are appointed by the parties in accord with the allotment procedure, they are restricted in guaranteeing “the good performance and impartiality of the administration” (Italian Constitution: Art. 97). As the ministerial office increasingly becomes an important step into a high-level political career, “bureaucratic responsibility” becomes an empty concept and the office holder becomes responsible in the party-ocratic sense that I have described. Reminding us again of the Weberian analysis, these processual distortions of responsibility have produced a situation whereby bureaucrats who maintain a moral standing of “impartiality” are in fact regarded as “irresponsible politicians”. They become, in this sense, “politicians of low moral standing” (Weber 1974: 95), and therefore unaccountable and untrustworthy. Their “impartiality”, like the ethics of responsibility claimed by the “political person”, is denied legitimacy and, we have seen, can be branded as leading dangerously to authoritarianism. However, in the present Italian climate, the observer is tempted to suggest that it is rather the abused power of some mayors elected under the new law that might lead to such an authoritarian outcome (Pardo 1997). Their princelike behaviour might well have legitimacy in sub-government, but obviously lacks moral legitimacy among the people.

Conclusion

This Brindisi ethnography suggests that the ethics of responsibility based on personal engagement appears to be in significant contrast with that of the politicians of sub-government. The actions of the “political person” seem in fact to point to the corruption of political representation and a strengthening of the system of party-ocracy and its corresponding ethics of responsibility. This person might well have facilitated a new, fresh approach that would acknowledge *personal* responsibility, in particular before society. Crucially, however, in doing so, he or she becomes irresponsible before, and unaccountable to, the party system.

The contemporary situation leaves the observer with a sceptical feeling about the changes that have recently occurred in the Italian political system. Time will tell whether such political persons will be able, in Weber’s words, to “arm themselves with the stoutness of heart” that makes them say “but still” (1991: 225), and whether they will be allowed to do so from a position that makes them accountable to their electorate and to the broader society. I am not suggesting an idealist, utopian future. Of course, the fight for power is bound to remain a central aspect of political competition. However, legitimisation is necessary for any management of power to be long-lasting and effective. Political parties must acknowledge that they need more than legal face-lifts for legitimacy to be socially ratified, and political obligation maintained. It is widely accepted that in contemporary democracies the realm of legitimacy cannot be confined to the legal system and to the power of making and applying the law, as suggested by legal positivism. The empirical situation ultimately reminds us that the rulers cannot justify

their power only with a *de facto* domination (whatever form that might take); instead, they need justification both on legal *and* moral grounds.

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