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“We’re all reformers now”: Politics and Institutional Reform in Italy

Vincent Della Sala

Review-essay on Gianfranco Pasquino, *Restituire lo scettro al principe* (Bari, Laterza, 1985); *Democrazia e Diritto* 6:XXII (1982), issue dedicated to “Sistema politico e riforme istituzionale”; and *Rinascita*, 25 gennaio 1986, special issue on “La prospettiva delle riforme istituzionale.”

In no other country in western Europe has political discourse come to be dominated by the issue of institutional reform as it has in Italy. It is difficult to find a politician, political observer, or consumer of a public service who is not in favor of a change of one sort or another. Not surprisingly, the range of proposals for change is a vast one and a great deal of political opportunism has influenced the direction of the debate. The important question which emerges (and is often totally ignored) is, “What reform for what purpose?” It is the question which presents the greatest challenge to the Left (or Lefts?) in Italy. If one believes that one of the reasons for the very existence of the Left is to challenge

the liberal, "democratic" institutions of the existing State, then the issue of institutional reform becomes the ground upon which all subsequent battles will be fought. In other words, in a post-industrial society where the relationship between civil society and political institutions has become the dominant theme in political discourse, institutional reform is *the* challenge to the Left.

The three works considered here reveal that the challenge has been understood and met with varying degrees of success. The special edition of *Democrazia e Diritto*, along with Pasquino's work, attempts to provide a systemic framework to the institutional question; while the feature in *Rinascita* reveals the extent to which the Italian political class (including its Socialist and Communist components) has failed to understand the dimensions of the problem at hand. *Democrazia e Diritto* is a bimonthly journal published by the "Centro di studi e iniziative per la riforma dello Stato," headed by one of the historic figures of the Communist Party (PCI), Pietro Ingrao. The aims of the Centro and its journal are evident in their titles. It is not surprising to find that Ingrao has come to represent, within the PCI, a minority position which has called for a "governo costituente," that is, an effort by all the political parties to redefine the rules of the game to reflect the socio-economic and political changes which the country has undergone since the Assemblée Costituente (1946-1947).

In a sense, each issue of *Democrazia e Diritto* is dedicated in one form or another to institutional reform. What distinguishes this particular issue is that it deals with the institutional question in a more systematic fashion by looking at the relationship between institutional reform and the political system. Massimo Brutti's opening essay, "Cambiare le regole del gioco?," sets out the complexity of the institutional question. He claims that "l'obiettivo degli ingegneri istituzionali è quello di un mutamento delle prassi politiche, che in molti casi sono più forti delle innovazioni giuridiche." Brutti does not need to point to the failure of reforms in the past (especially the creation of the regional governments in 1970) to change the terms of political discourse in Italy. What he is addressing in this essay are the proposals presented by the Socialists beginning in the mid-1970s for changes which would strengthen the power of the executive. Without delving too deeply into the Socialist proposals, it can be said that their diagnosis of the problem focused on the lack of political leadership at the center of the political system. Their solution was for the direct election of the President of the Republic, recreating in Italy an institutional framework similar to the Gaullist Fifth Republic in France. Brutti,

in setting out the objectives of the issue, aptly points out that the Socialist proposal for change in Italy would not address the fundamental issue of changing the terms of political discourse and practice which are at the heart of the institutional question. This is a theme which recurs throughout this volume.

Perhaps the most interesting contribution in *Democrazia e Diritto* comes from Carlo Mezzanotte and Roberto Nania's piece on "Riforma e Costituzione." The authors clearly point out how the failure of the decision-making capacity of post-industrial societies has been interpreted in Italy as a constitutional, rather than political or policy problem. Interestingly enough, this has spared Italy a strong dose of Reaganism or, perhaps worse, Thatcherism. The authors argue that one of the most characteristic elements of constitutional development in Italy is the relationship between the party system and the organization of the State; specifically, this refers to the penetration of the parties into the State apparatus, rendering marginal the autonomy of political institutions. This development has resulted in the constitutional arrangements created in 1947 being unable to deal with a political system which has "occupied" the State. It is this lack of institutional autonomy which has made it difficult for the State to respond to the flood of new demands being placed upon it, creating a blocked or stalled democracy in both institutional and political terms.

The essay by Mezzanotte and Nania, much like the other works in this issue, provides a useful examination of the "political" basis of the institutional question, as well as an incisive criticism of some of the other proposals for change, precisely because the latter fail to change the terms of political discourse. These works in this volume, then, provide an important contribution for the Left's understanding of the institutional question. Yet despite this effort, the volume falls short on one important count: it fails to provide a coherent set of proposals for change which can be the basis for discussion.

If one had to recommend only one book on institutional reform in Italy, it would have to be Pasquino's *Restituire lo scettro al principe*. The author is not only one of Italy's foremost students of politics, but also a Senator for the Sinistra Indipendente. In this volume he brings together many strands of an argument which have appeared elsewhere, including his regular contributions to the editorial page of *La Repubblica*. Pasquino makes it clear from the start that any understanding of the institutional question must address the issue in systemic terms, and that any piecemeal approach to reform cannot deal with the deeper roots of the prob-

lem. The framework for his argument is based on two concepts: the "overload" of demands on existing political institutions and the crisis of representation.

Pasquino's conclusion is that, in the Italian case, any reform which does not seriously alter the role of political parties is bound to fail; for what has happened is that not only have the political parties come to "occupy" the State (thereby no longer acting as intermediaries between civil society and political institutions), but that they can no longer be held accountable by citizen-voters. His proposals for change can be summarized thus: aim to create an institutional framework which provides governments the opportunity to present and implement coherent policy program, and more important, a framework in which decision-making is made visible in public arenas so that citizens can hold those responsible for it accountable.

Pasquino's is, no doubt, an ambitious project, and it is useful to look at some of his other proposals. The one that has drawn the most attention aims to reform the electoral system. He argues that with the present system, voters have no control over who will be in government (coalitions are formed *after* elections) nor over the policy outcomes of their choices (policy program are part of the coalition agreements, and governments then have to face the difficult task of having them approved). In this system, effective political power is taken away from citizens, and rests in the hands of the party leaders who make decisions away from such visible arenas as Parliament. Pasquino proposes a two-ballot election for a single chamber of 500 members. In the first ballot, voters would choose 400 members who would be elected on the basis of proportional representation. Three-quarters of the remaining hundred seats would be awarded in a second ballot held a week later to the coalition or party which achieved a majority. Moreover, before the second ballot is held, each party or coalition would have to present its candidate for Prime Minister and a policy program which it would be mandated to pursue. The resignation of the Prime Minister during the course of the legislature would mean an early election. Some of Pasquino's other proposals for change include a strengthening of local government and more frequent use of referenda.

The important point in this discussion of electoral engineering is not so much the technical aspects of the argument, but Pasquino's attempt to address both the problem of creating a framework for cohesive and stable governments, and that of securing adequate representation of interests in society. At the heart

of this attempt is a very real concern with providing citizens with the instruments to choose how they will be governed. Throughout the book, the dominant theme is the creation of accountable and visible (transparent) political institutions and relationships. Given the suffocating role that party leaders have come to play in Italy, (not to mention the role of such obscure elements as the P2 and other forms of the "potere occulto"), Pasquino's proposal is a serious challenge to the existing institutional framework. Whether it can ever be implemented is another question, but it should certainly be the starting point for any discussion on the Left for providing an alternative to existing political discourse and practice.

In a sense, very little can be said of the special issue of *Rinascita*, except that it is a useful summary of the Italian political class's positions on the institutional question. It demonstrates how the PCI basically remains rooted to the idea that the solution rests in creating the conditions for *l'alternanza*; in other words, making possible a regular change of the parties in the governing coalition. The question this immediately raises is what can the Left hope to achieve if it were to come to power, given that the basic institutional problems remain unchanged. In other words, is it realistic to assume that the solution to governing in Italy lies in transcending the *conventio ad excludendum*? There is no doubt that a "circulation of élites" is necessary for any institutional change, but it should not be seen as the means by which the Left can offer an alternative to the existing framework.

The issue of *Rinascita* raises important problems concerning the institutional question. It is apparent that if any serious change is to come about, it will have to be done by the very political class which is the cause of the governance problem and the obstacle to reform. Both the special issue of *Democrazia e Diritto* and Pasquino's work are asking the political class (namely the parties) to alter an institutional arrangement which they have come to dominate. It is, as the comments in *Rinascita* reveal, perhaps too optimistic to hope that these same parties will implement the changes which will redefine basic political discourse and relationships in Italy. The challenge for the Left is to adopt a serious framework to present as an alternative (perhaps Pasquino's) and seize the initiative for change.