Italy: The Political Class in its Motherland

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Introduction

As Italy’s probably most respected intellectual happened to observe, “the political class [in Italy] forms an entity of its own and appears as a separate body with its own sphere of action, which is perceived perfectly by those who do not belong to it”. “By the way”, he continued, “the same perception is also shared by members of the political class themselves who, as soon as they walk through the portals of the Montecitorio or Madama palaces [seats of the Chamber and the Senate], immediately become aware that they are citizens of higher rank and behave accordingly” (Bobbio 1996, VIII). Although these “elementary remarks” (ibid., IX) cannot be taken as a test of the “class consciousness” of both the political rulers and the ruled, they are certainly a clue to the success of Gaetano Mosca’s view in the Italian public debate at the end of the 20th century – one century after the publication of his masterpiece, Elementi di scienza politica (1896).

Mosca first resorted to the ‘political class’ concept dealing with the workings of the only just unified Italian state – a state in which, as compared to older and more firmly established constitutional regimes, those in power controlled institutions rather than the contrary. Such a situation made it even more clear in Italy than elsewhere in the Western world that the nuts and bolts of political life can scarcely be accounted for by legal principles alone. If it is true that theoretical frameworks tend to emerge from single country anomalies, Mosca’s approach turned the idiosyncrasies of late 19th century Italian politics into a foundational concept of modern political science and sociology (Calise 1989, 195).

Despite such historical incentives, after Mosca, the concept of political class was neglected in the scientific debate and, more frequently, only spoken of in derogatory terms. Mosca’s concept had the misfortune of witnessing the entrenched opposition to empirical social sciences among Italian academics that made it, for a long time, impossible to treat the political class in its real-life nature.

To find a serious empirical study on the Italian political class, one has to wait for Giovanni Sartori’s investigation on the Italian parliament (Sartori et al. 1963). After Sartori’s seminal book and some isolated inquiries (Sprefico 1965; Meynaud 1966; DiRenzo 1967; Sani 1967), research on the political class blossomed in the seventies. Along with theoretical analyses (Farneti 1973), empirical studies dealing with ministers (Calise and Mannheimer 1982; Dogan 1989), parliamentarians (Putnam 1973; Barnes 1977; Cotta 1979), party cadres and leaders (Bettin 1970; Sani 1972a and 1972b), as well as with town and regional councilors (Barberis 1983). Overall, a number of aspects of the background, career, and culture of politicians have been investigated over the last three decades.

The boundaries of the Italian political class remain, nevertheless, extremely difficult to trace (Calise 1989, 186-87). Apart from theoretical problems (e.g., should individuals at
the head of public firms and agencies appointed by local and central governments be included?), the ‘anti-politician’ attitude of public opinion has always encouraged ‘hidden political professionalism’ within party structures (Panebianco 1988). Much for the same reason, MPs and local political elites are accustomed to denying full-time professionalism by presenting themselves, in biographical accounts, as ‘free-lance journalists’ or ‘consultants’. It is likely that this self-denying attitude may even be on the rise. Thus, estimates of the size of the political class vary from some twenty thousand (Sartori et al. 1963, 281) to half a million people ( Guarino 1980, 50; Sidoti 1993, 339). Whilst, as will be pointed out, political professionalism is a growing historical phenomenon, estimates of its growth mainly differ due to the working definition of ‘political class’ as such. In the 1991 census, 1,141 persons were recorded as “members of government and legislative assemblies” and 8,431 as “heads of collective bodies of national interest” (Istat 1995, 356). Presumably, the political class is larger but these individuals – as self-defined professionals of political and quasi-political activities – form its more conscious core.

If we are to pay greater attention to recent developments, the line dividing the political class from the political stratum (see Dahl 1976, 107ff.) appears less clear and more flexible than it used to be. Between 1992 and 1996, political scandals shook the Italian political class at all levels. Suffice it to say that at the end of the 11th legislature (1994), the judiciary prosecuted around 60 percent of parliamentarians and thousands of locally elected representatives. Several parties – including the oldest one, the Partito Socialista Italiano (PSI) – were disbanded; all the others were forced, at the very least, to change their name. Delegitimation spread rapidly. The classe politica as a whole, which was often taken as being the culprit for all national problems, was firebranded by journalists and commentators with the easily recognizable stigma of corruption. Opposition to full-time politicians entered as a primary – and successful – point in the platforms of new parties in 1994. In the public debate, limits to political professionalism were proposed as a remedy against corruption and a spur to a more vital and efficient democracy (Panebianco 1993). At the same time, the political class theme was resumed by social scientists as a factor for the understanding of system-level continuities and change (Mastropaolo 1993a; Pizzorno 1993; Cotta and Verzichelli 1996).

Despite this return of interest, a full-fledged portrait of the Italian political class is still lacking to date. Far from claiming to fill this gap, we aim to provide a broad description of some aspects of the Italian political class with special reference to recent transformations. In doing this, we will attempt to grasp the social and political conditions of the process of political professionalization. To deal with such a process conceptually, we set aside the old and tried amateur-professional dichotomy. Political professionalism is regarded rather as a continuous dimension, the level of which is contingent on the degree of economic dependence, duration, and intensity of involvement of political office-holders. In historical terms, we will chiefly, albeit not exclusively, focus on national legislators, considering that usually parliament stands out as the focal point of political careers – as a fundamental goal for emerging politicians and a necessary starting point for more ambitious ones.

1. Political professionalization in historical perspective

The emergence of Fascism (1922-1943) splits the history of the Italian democratic experience in two phases: Liberal Italy, a constitutional monarchy which has to be
considered a proto-democracy characterized by low (although progressively inclusive) participation, and Republican Italy, traditionally described as a party state or, with a more negative tinge, a ‘partycracy’ (Maranini 1968). These phases differ sharply regarding their social and institutional context (see chapter 2) and, of course, the basic features of their political class. A less dramatic but significant change took place at the beginning of the 1990s, when the party system changed drastically and the country experienced the highest turnover of political personnel ever recorded after the regime shake-ups of 1921-1924 and 1946-1948 (Cotta and Verzichelli 1996; Verzichelli 1998). As we write, it is hard to predict what the outcomes will be of such a recent turning point, except that the political class has undergone a somewhat relevant transformation of its typical background and composition (see last chapter).

In historical perspective, the evolution of political professionalism is perhaps most visible within legislatures. After all, Gaetano Mosca had already outlined the empirical importance of “elected politicians” as the core group of the ruling class in parliamentary regimes, among whom “real” leadership is at stake (Mosca 1982, 1021).

The rising political professionalism of MPs was a central finding in a pioneer analysis of Italian legislatures (Sartori et al. 1963, 323-86). The consolidation of a professional body of politicians is the result of the growing duration, intensity, and specialization of the work of parliamentarians. In Sartori’s idealtypical scheme, non-professional politicians (rentiers, local notables) were progressively replaced by semi-professional politicians (individuals coming from non-political occupations but with strong expectations to hold political posts in the future), and these by purely professional politicians (individuals without an alternative occupation). Thus, while it would be misleading to conceive a simple law of succession from one type of MP to another, the emergence of professionalism among parliamentarians follows, to a considerable extent, the historical trend observed in Germany (see Borchert and Golsch in this volume), except for the fact that in Italy the control of local resources – agrarian ownership at first, party organization later on – has always been more important than the support of central interest groups (Farneti 1973; Mastropaolo 1986).  

After the First World War, social and political unrest shook the political system profoundly. The liberal political class proved to be unprepared to tackle the economic crisis and the mounting protest. As a result, there was a considerable turnover of MPs in 1919. Not until the advent of Fascism, however, did changes within the political class occur in the form of ‘amalgamation’ – to use Michels’ formula – rather than in that of ‘replacement’ of traditional notables. In particular, circulation of the ministerial elite was very limited (Cotta 1983).

As Fascism took power, many old politicians were expelled from State institutions, replaced by a younger generation of political cadres and leaders among whom aristocrats were more and more a minority. Yet the process was less sudden and dramatic than that caused by the rise of National Socialism in Germany. Although members of the fascist elites were socially somehow more varied than their predecessors, the upper class continued to be over-represented in political offices. Local studies show that after 1927, when Mussolini’s dictatorship had consolidated, the bulk of the fascist political class consisted of entrepreneurs, academics, army officials and high-level civil servants. Although it formed the main social pillar of the regime, the petty bourgeoisie was given little room at the top. Overall, Fascism set up an unprecedented political control of society, which brought about an increase in the number of political jobs as well as, of course, a
larger than ever cultural homogeneity of political office-holders. As a consequence of both processes, Fascism, in its own way, helped institutionalize political professionalism in Italy.

Only with the comeback of democracy and the introduction of the universal franchise, could a real expansion of the social recruitment pools for Italian politicians occur. Political professionalism was then furthered by the democratization of representation. In the first instance, regime change brought with itself an almost total turnover of the political class. Only 14.6 percent of the members of the Constituent Assembly in 1946 had had previous parliamentary experience (Cotta 1979), while the large majority of MPs had entered politics through party involvement during the liberation civil war (1943-1945). An instrumental union of strongly dissenting parties marked the civil war itself, which was to be reflected in the Constitution of 1948. In the years to come, the surprising “Constitution-worship” of politicians from all sides (Putnam 1973, 193) was proof that the pact of cooperation enshrined in the Constitution continued to keep the political class unified in spite of overt ideological conflicts.

An equally widespread belief of Italian politicians in the Republican Age has been that political power belonged to parties more than to any other institution – such as parliament or government (ibid., 13). Parties, indeed, were pivotal and undisputed actors not only in decision-making, but also in political recruitment and the structuring of careers. Since the early post-war years, members of the Italian political class have typically shared a precocious involvement in party work and a subsequent long-standing career in party positions. Parties – especially the more centralized ones, such as the PCI (Partito Comunista Italiano) – governed these careers by establishing regular paths and timings of the progressive rise from lower to upper political offices.

In historical perspective, the mean tenure of Italian MPs stands out as a good indicator of party control of political careers (see Figure 1). The average seniority of MPs decreases considerably in 1946, remaining thereafter stable around a ‘normal’ level until the 1990s. Although this merely quantitative measurement is only a rough guideline for the analysis of parliamentary careers, its trend turns out to be in line with some other developments illustrated so far: (a) a first phase of formation of a stable parliamentary class (1861-1880) and its further consolidation (1880-1900); (b) an incipient decline of notables during Giolitti’s age (1900-1919); and (c) a much greater change in the years following the First World War, when a large part of “gentlemen politicians” were replaced by “party professionals” (Sartori et al. 1963; Cotta 1983). Finally, whereas in the 1946-1992 period the mean tenure is stable around 2.5 legislatures, after 1992 the average seniority sinks to an unprecedented level, because of the almost total breakup of the old political class and a subsequent, uncertain transitory phase when a less consistent pattern of parliamentary elite circulation seems to be at work.
2. The institutional context

Since its unification in 1860, liberal Italy has been marked by territorial fragmentation – in economic, cultural, and political terms. A number of regional, sub-regional, and urban political institutions have always existed; yet a real decentralization of the state to represent these differences has never gained momentum. The 1948 Constitution established a general principle of regional devolution, which was to be implemented only in 1970, often being limited by central control of economic and fiscal policies. Nonetheless, clear-cut discontinuities between pre-fascist and post-fascist democracy need to be stressed:

- the form of state: constitutional monarchy (1861-1948) vs. republic;
- suffrage: restricted (until 1913) vs. universal (extended to women in 1948);
- the electoral system: majority (until 1919) vs. proportional (until 1994) or mixed after 1994;\(^9\)
- party organizations and party power: erratic vs. hegemonic.

The bulk of such basic innovations finds its legal rationale in the republican Constitution of 1948.\(^{10}\) This document, a long and rigid set of 139 articles, gave birth to a democratic and pluralistic parliamentary government based on a mix of liberal principles and social provisions inspired by both catholic and socialist traditions.
Albeit in a somewhat ambiguous way in regard to their functions and prerogatives, the Constitution acknowledged the public role of political parties, which were, since the aftermath of Fascism (i.e., before the approval of the Constitution), the gatekeepers of the political system and the real sources of policy-making (Pasquino 1987; Morlino 1991). Many analyses have underscored the linkage between the constitutional framework and the centrality of political parties (Maranini 1968; Scoppola 1993), but little attention has been paid to the effects of constitutional norms on the political class. Recently, a new regulation of electoral campaigns (Fusaro 1994) and the protests against the public financing of political parties seem partially to have endangered their extra legem status, forcing all parliamentary groups to report on their use of public funds. At the same time, a partial revision of the parliamentary authorization to make MPs liable for criminal prosecution (provided by art. 68 of the Constitution), has triggered an ongoing debate on the immunity rights of MPs. These rights remain, nonetheless, a basic privilege of parliamentarians to date.

In the republican age, the role of parliamentarians has been defined substantially by common constraints and resources: on the one hand, the severe influence of party (or party faction) leaders on major decisions through the control of candidacies and appointments; on the other, the legislative powers of small parliamentary committees. The first factor hindered the institutionalization of parliamentary groups as autonomous centers of decision-making, as is instead the case in other countries; the second factor gave back some power to MPs allowing them, as they sat in parliamentary committees, to engage in log-rolling and to form consociational alliances on a personal basis – which yielded a myriad of ad hoc, and sometimes contradictory, particularistic laws (leggine).11

3. The political class

3.1. Size and composition

A stylized picture (figure 2) shows the size and structure of the current political class. The size of the horizontal bars (representing the strata of the different elective and executive positions) has not changed in the last twenty-five years, whereas the triangle area (representing full time politicians) shrank.

The top of the pyramid, the position of national representatives, never decreased in Italy, although the proposal of a drastic reduction of the MPs was repeatedly discussed. In fact, the elected members of parliament numbered about six hundred in the lower chamber before Fascism12 and rose to one thousand in republican legislatures.13 After the Second World War, the bulk of them have been long-standing politicians and/or party professionals – i.e., members of the political class.
The largest part of the political class sits in local institutions. Official data from the Interior Ministry report that 6,500 people were involved in regional and provincial councils and governments in 1998; town councilors were 150,000 until 1993, when their number was reduced to 120,000; mayors are about 8,000. Turnover in local institutions is always higher than in parliament - around 60 percent in normal times, up to 80 percent in the mid-nineties. Correspondingly, among local office-holders political professionals are a minority. Yet, during their mandate, few mayors, mayoral assistants in major towns, and regional councilors can afford to retain their private occupations. Furthermore, one can find a hard core of local political professionals in any province, as well as in regions and municipalities, which represent the third sub-national division or tier in Italy and, until recently, even in the smallest communities, leadership roles were assigned on the basis of political career backgrounds. Overall, semi-professionalism appears to be the most common condition of local politicians (Caciagli 1991).

In addition, the Italian political class comprises party cadres and leaders living off politics – in central and local offices. Up to recent years, all parties used to maintain long-standing apparatchiks in their ruling bodies. Yet their number was cut sharply in the aftermath of the scandals concerning illegal party funding in the nineties. According to some estimates, in 1994, the largest party organizations – that of the Democratic Party of the Left (Partito Democratico della Sinistra [PDS], then renamed as Democratici di Sinistra [DS], heir of the Italian Communist Party [PCI]) – counted on 670 functionaries; there used to be 3,141 in the PCI in 1976 (Baccetti 1997, 170-1). By the late seventies, it was said that Christian Democrats had about 1,000 and the Socialists some 700 employed officials (Pacifici 1983, 100, 116), while the right-wing MSI paid 62 salaries in 1980 and its successor AN only 26 in 1994, when it entered government for the first time (Tarchi 1997, 286). As traditional parties crumbled, in 1993, the Ciampi government even promoted a law that favored the pensions of party workers in order to facilitate the cut in
party personnel. Seemingly, however, party professionals reacted to the perspective of retirement with a harsher infra-organizational competition for being selected as candidates to public offices, thus fostering the political professionalism of representation.

At the lowest levels, to these figures one should add an undefinable number of public employees (e.g., in local administration) who, being party members, are ‘detached’ from their routine and indulgently earmarked for political work by elected executives. Similar roles are played by portaborse (literally ‘bag-carriers’) – i.e., assistants to national MPs and European Union MPs – who certainly live off politics and, in some cases, perform their job with an eye to a future political career. Finally, other indubitable members of the political class hold offices in trade unions, non-elective political authorities (e.g., public health agencies), public firms, the European parliament, and government.

Such a social dissemination, so to speak, of the political class stems from the expansionism of Italian parties, which have allegedly served as prototypes for Katz’ and Mair’s (1995) well-known model of “cartel party”. Given this dispersion, it is hard to draw a complete sociological profile of the Italian political class. Existing research, in fact, primarily focuses on the social characteristics of parliamentarians and local elites.

The average age of Italian legislators in the 1946-1996 period (in the Lower Chamber) was about 50 years; the average age at their first election was 45. The majority of the MPs had a high educational background (most often in law and humanities, even though recently business and medical backgrounds have increased), as well as a middle-upper class origin. Apparently, in this respect, little has changed from the times of the old ‘liberal’ political class. A closer look, however, shows that many occupational categories have disappeared from the parliamentary landscape since the Second World War, i.e., financial rentiers, army officers, and landowners. Others have diminished, like practicing lawyers, whose numbers have dropped from about 50 percent of the MPs in the monarchic Camera to 32 percent in 1946 and to 11 percent in 1992. In contrast, throughout the period 1948-1992, about one fourth of all parliamentary personnel was recruited from among full-time politicians – i.e., people whose last occupation (if not the only one) before election, was a party or trade union job.

After reaching a peak in the sixties, the proportion of experienced political professionals in the Camera has declined slowly until the nineties, when the precipitous fall of many parties, the partial dismissal of the proportional electoral system and the judicial indictment of a large part of the professional politicians, made room for less experienced representatives. In general, the stronger the party organization, the larger the number of experienced political professionals among its representatives. Hence, the PDS/DS (hereafter simply DS) and the Partito della Rifondazione Comunista (Refounded Communist Party, PRC) on the left wing, as well as Alleanza Nazionale (AN) on the right, can count currently on a higher proportion of political professionals in their ranks. Ceteris paribus, left-wing parties tend to rely on a larger number of career politicians.

Party differences in the social composition of Italian MPs have always been and remain strong. The two main parliamentary groups of the winning coalition of 1996 show some continuity with the traditional party of the left (the Communist party) – in particular the election to parliament at a relatively early age and the predominance of political professionals, teachers and academics among them. Lawyers and other professionals are instead over-represented in the ranks of Alleanza Nazionale, while Forza Italia and the Lega Nord rely on somewhat newer kinds of political personnel. Berlusconi’s party has taken to parliament an extraordinarily high share of entrepreneurs and managers (many
working in some of the party leader’s firms, especially in advertising). Among the MPs of the League, finally, artisans, salesmen, petty bourgeois businessmen, and less qualified professionals prevail.

In spite of recent changes, the gender bias in the Italian parliament has remained substantially unaltered. In 1996 women amounted to less than 10 percent of Italian MPs, about as many as in the eighties. Nor has the reshuffling of the party system affected party differences in women’s underrepresentation – always more severe in center and right wing parties (Verzichelli 1998; 2002a). Similarly, the age profile of parliamentarians has not changed: turnover of the elite has not necessarily implied rejuvenation.

As far as can be seen from some studies on mayors (Spreafico 1965; Segatori 1992), political professionalism has advanced at a slower pace in the periphery of the Italian political system. Notables until the mid-sixties still frequently governed local communities. In contrast, political professionalism has always been more pronounced at the regional level – for instance, as early as 1971, 27 percent of the members of the Sicilian regional assembly were full-time party or trade union professionals (Mastropaolo 1993b, 101). In those same years, municipal councils started to become the realm of middle-aged male civil servants (Barberis 1983). The bureaucrats’ ‘invasion’ of local governments culminated in the late eighties, when four out of ten councilors in towns with more than 100,000 inhabitants were public employees (Bettin and Magnier 1989, 127).

Interestingly, their retreat began some time before – not after – the introduction of the direct election of local executives in 1993, in favor of professionals. This replacement may find a rationale in budget restrictions in local government which, since the late eighties, reduced opportunities for recruitment and promotion of political clientele. As parties lost the capacity to reward their activists with jobs or career advancements in public administration, civil servants somehow withdrew from political commitments. Room was thus created for other possible aspirants, among whom professionals frequently prevailed thanks to politically useful resources such as their wealth, prestige, specific skills, time available and far reaching social connections.

By the mid-nineties, professionals formed the majority of politicians elected to local government – among mayors, they had grown from 13.3 percent (1987) to 23.5 percent (1993), and finally to 40.5 percent in 1995. Although not so spectacularly, in the last few years, the number of women has increased, reaching a share similar to that of female MPs – about 10 percent. In contrast, the number of young people has diminished even despite the high turnover of political personnel. Finally, the social composition of party officials reflects, to a large extent, that of the rest of the Italian political class. Among them there are few women, most of whom are concentrated in the ranks of the Democratic Left.

3.2. Political recruitment and political careers

Two main patterns of entry into the political class soon emerged in post-war democratic Italy: a ‘party-apparatus model’ of recruitment, close to the empirical example of the Communist Party, and a ‘clientele party’ model close to the example of the Christian Democrats (Cotta 1979). In the first case, candidates were chosen on the basis of their work within the party organization; non-party elective offices did not constitute a crucial experience in the party promotion to higher positions. In the latter case, as a considerable number of voters could be mobilized on the basis of clientele, parties recruited – and
somehow coordinated – individual political entrepreneurs. At the end of the day, differences between the two models depended on the degree of party centralization and personnel homogeneity – both considerably higher in the PCI than in the DC (Wertman 1988; Norris 1996).

All parties, nevertheless, were not only concerned over recruitment, but also over the early socialization and training of their recruits to the rules of the political game. To do this most effectively, the political class used to be formed by individuals:

- who entered active politics early in their lives – in 1992, two thirds of the MPs had entered the political arena before the age of 25;
- who served their apprenticeship in some party office – more than half the MPs in 1992;
- and who had a lengthy party membership - more than twenty years on average among 1992 MPs (Recchi 1996 and 1999).

Even local politicians were not exempt from the imperative to prove their party allegiance and respect the timing and steps of a gradual career path; for instance, in 1992, Italian mayors had accumulated – on average – thirty years in political office, half of which in party posts (Bettin 1997, 207).

The party roots of parliamentarians is reasonably well indicated by the fact of their having held party offices prior to their election to the Camera or not. In the long run, by using this indicator, two moments of decline of the ‘partisan’ type of political professionalism emerge. The first phase, in the middle of the seventies, followed a moment of increasing consensus for the major parties of the republican age (DC and PCI). From that time on, these parties faced electoral decline, which they tried to resist by resorting to ‘independent’ and ‘technical’ candidates on their lists. The second phase of change spans through the nineties, when the proportion of MPs with some partisan socialization to active politics sank dramatically (but in 1996 increased slightly again). There are few doubts that this phenomenon is an effect of the crisis of the party system. In 1994, all political forces in parliament were new (at least formally) since none of the labels used by previous parliamentary groups survived. Furthermore, many of these new parties proved to be unstable and provisional, suffering a large number of splits and mergers during the two legislatures following (Di Virgilio 1998; 2002). The instability within the parliamentary elite was also marked by many unprecedented shifts from one parliamentary group to another (Verzichelli 2002b).

Nonetheless, data about the MPs elected in 2001 show that a political socialization grounded on some party experience (often coupled with a background as local representatives) still remains the typical feature in the recruitment of national representatives. Generally speaking, the political experiences of the parliamentary elite look very similar to those of their predecessors a couple of decades ago.
The effect of the change from a proportional to a majority electoral system on political recruitment is hard to assess. It seems, though, that recruitment processes and strategies have remained heavily centralized (Di Virgilio 2002). The new system has only brought about some rather predictable innovations – such as a more direct presence of candidates in their constituencies and the selection of personalities who can represent the whole coalition – but not others, such as primaries.

Research on the political careers of Italian MPs has distinguished three stages: (a) the pre-political, consisting in the accumulation of resources prior to political office, (b) the political, i.e. the set of political offices prior to election into parliament, and (c) the parliamentary stage, made up of all infra-parliamentary positions which create opportunities for further career development (Cotta 1979 and 1983). This latter stage deserves special attention, as it is a common concern for MPs – and a more dramatic one considering the sharp rise of parliamentary turnover in the nineties (Cotta and Verzichelli 1996). In fact, parliament has rarely been a final step in the careers of the members of the Italian political class: it was rather the launching pad towards more important (such as governmental) or more secure (such as party or sub-governmental agencies) political appointments.

On the one hand, until 1990, practically all ministers were recruited from among MPs. Equally, in Italy, a conspicuous share of European parliamentarians was, and still is, recruited from among national MPs. Interestingly, neither ministers nor European MPs are accustomed to leaving their parliamentary seats. Resistance to leaving parliament seems
to prove, once again, the centrality of the legislature as the ‘natural arena’ of the nation’s political class.

On the other hand, typical post-parliamentary career destinies were positions in sub-governmental agencies or public firms, or in the party apparatus (Sartori et al. 1963, 329). The first option was more widespread in the DC and its allies, the second one in the Communist Party. According to informal party rules, Christian Democratic MPs had to maintain a high personal electoral score in order to run for sub-governmental positions. In contrast, the Communists used to re-enter the party organizational apparatus after two terms – with the notable exception of party leaders. While the first career pattern spread out in all parties through the years, both have survived until the nineties – i.e., for about half a century, an extraordinarily long period of continuity in a comparative perspective (Cotta and Verzichelli 1996).

Apart from the few remarkable exceptions mentioned above, in Italy, the accumulation of political offices is subject to many legal incompatibilities. For this reason, also, the national-level political class is quite distinct from its local counterpart. Differently from other cases, local politics in Italy did not use to be a necessary preliminary experience in the careers of the political elite for a long time (Guadagnini 1984). In other words, local and national circuits of political careers tended to be separated. Suffice it to say that among the twenty-three Italian prime ministers of the 1945-1998 period, none had ever been mayor or member of any local executive; only six had sat as town councilors and one as regional councilor (Bontempi 1995, 32). Among the MPs in 1992, only 18 percent had held the office of mayor (Bettin 1993, 55).

Why was this so? Until recently, the average MP regarded local government as a trap rather than a training ground. Scarce autonomy in decision-making made executive roles in local government not very rewarding in terms of popularity and, hence, as bases for further career advancement. Thus, local government occasionally served as a ‘parking lot’ for old leaders excluded from the big game rather than as an apprenticeship for future statesmen.

However, since 1993, mayors are directly elected by the population and, as a result, wield broader institutional powers than before when they were subject to appointment by the town councils. On the whole, their popularity has grown considerably. The same has to be said concerning the executive offices at the regional level, especially after the introduction of a direct election of the regional governors (1999) and the significant devolution of power triggered by a recent constitutional reform (2001). Therefore, we could easily argue that success as local executives (e.g., as directly elected mayors and presidents of regional governments) is bound to be a more effective career springboard than it used to be. At the same time, we are observing an increasing process of bi-directional “level hopping”, since a significant amount of second line national politicians (including MPs) seem to be interested in moving back to local government offices (such as mayors of big towns or regional presidents) in order to gain visibility and influence in decision-making.

### 3.3. Living off politics

In Italy, a real salary for legislators was introduced only in 1948, while the small amount provided by ordinary legislation since 1880 was nothing more than a sort of token reimbursement. Political jobs were not an institutionalized activity. The pre-republican
Statute only established a formal ‘opening’ of the annual parliamentary session, leaving the organization of work to internal regulations. In practice, the degree of involvement of every single deputy was, since the first legislature of 1861, relatively high, but only after 1948 was the busy agenda of the MPs formally determined by both the Constitution and parliamentary norms.  

Describing the social profile and behavior of the Italian MPs in the first two decades of republican history, Sartori et al. (1963) highlighted the emergence of an elite ‘living off politics’. The starting point of the new era was, of course, the introduction of a real salary for every MP – an effect of the 1948 Constitution. Since 1965 the salary of parliamentarians is automatically tied to the income of higher judges (presidenti di sezione di Corte di Cassazione). A number of small changes have been introduced subsequently to permit greater tax deductions.

To date, the monthly parliamentary salary (indennità) is around 6000 US$ after taxes. In addition, every MP receives a daily allowance, a standard reimbursement covering mail and telephone expenses (both in Rome and in the constituency), free train and flight tickets, and a fixed amount for recruiting a legislative assistant. Increases in MPs’ salaries are not subject to external control: the normal inflation index, applied as to any other public sector category, determines salary dynamics, while parliament can modify its members’ other privileges autonomously. In the past, this opportunity was exploited to introduce many fringe benefits and pay rises.

In 1993, however, under the siege of a very hostile public opinion, parliamentarians reduced the allowance for parliamentary assistants and linked its use to more detailed justifications. Some restrictions on outside income were also introduced. As a consequence, MPs cannot receive public salaries or engage in contractual relations with public administrations. Moreover, every year their total incomes and assets (as well as the tax declarations of their families) must be transmitted to the secretary of their parliamentary branch who can (and usually does) make them public.

Another crucial theme, related to the salary of MPs, concerns pensions. As is common in public service, the years in parliament can be cumulated with a previous public sector career in order to obtain a pension. Alternatively, a period of two full legislatures is sufficient to be entitled to a life-long pension. Therefore, at least one re-election is important in order to have the chance to live off politics following parliamentary mandates. Budgetary constraints and growing anti-political feeling have recently persuaded MPs to make minor adjustments to these rules, which are perceived anyway as an important privilege for the political elite.

4. The political class and institutional reform

In the age of partitocrazia, there were very few proposals for institutional and constitutional reform and the majority dealt with details that could strengthen the party control of Italian politics. In particular, one of the main concerns of the political class was to update parliamentary procedures aimed at preserving the prerogatives of MPs in certain legislative sectors. The reform of the budget system of 1978 is, for instance, a good example of the efforts of parliament to safeguard its prominence in decision-making. In the ongoing competition between legislative and executive powers, the political class defended
collective bodies (parliament at the center, local councils at the periphery) against possible institutional reforms towards a less assembly-like form of government (Cavalli 1992). This defense was, in fact, a way of defending the role of parties, which find themselves always more at ease in controlling members of assemblies rather than monocratic office-holders.

The protests against party omnipotence were, at the beginning, limited to the voices of some intellectuals (e.g., Maranini 1968) but, as time passed, demand for institutional reforms rose. In 1970, two important constitutional provisions were enacted. On the one hand, some devolution was set in motion with the introduction of regional administrations, which created new political posts and thus expanded the political class. On the other hand, the referendum for the abrogation of laws (referendum abrogativo) was put to work. That tool was at first used by minor and isolated parties to change some pieces of legislation (among them, the public funding of parties introduced in 1974). Later on, this instrument proved itself useful in bringing about strong innovations, after some twenty years in which the theme of constitutional reforms was raised again and again.

Before the nineties, this theme had indeed entered the parliamentary debates recurrently but without any serious consequence due to crossed vetoes between various groups (Morel 1996). Only a new wave of referenda, this time aimed at dismantling the old proportional electoral system, happened to engender political change. More precisely, the referenda served as a precipitating factor, conjuring up with events like the restructuring of some parties (in particular the PCI) and the scandals of Tangentopoli (a sort of “Bribesville”). The ‘partycratic’ political class proved unable to defend itself from such attacks. What followed these events was a confused alternation of emergency cabinets, unstable majorities, fluctuations of public opinion and fluidity inside electoral and political coalitions. The technocratic cabinets of Ciampi (1993) and Dini (1995) brought about some relevant reforms, especially a new electoral law and a new form of government in local administration. In contrast, the parliaments of the nineties, just like their predecessors, did not react to the growing social pressures for change with the energy, creativity, and courage needed to match the willingness of self-defense with the necessity of innovation.

Eight years after the beginning of the “Italian revolution” and with two parliaments being elected with the new semi-majority electoral system, the configuration of the political class is still unstable and dramatically linked to its inability to change the rules. At the beginning of the 21st century, Italy continues to pay a high price in terms of electoral disaffection, party volatility, and governmental ineffectiveness. Surveys and opinion polls still talk about the public’s growing distrust of ‘politicians’ while referendum movements, local separatist parties and new leaders with strong territorial support are clamoring for a modernization of politics. Parliamentary parties and elites continue, however, to control the political stage since challengers outside of democratic institutions are not taken seriously. While this attests to the legitimacy enjoyed by the political system in spite of the scandals and the party crisis of the 1990s, there is the risk that the current political class may become overconfident as a result. Neither politicians who survived the storm nor newcomers make any attempt to engage in joint actions to strengthen the bases of their elite status. To this end, any measure increasing the accountability of those elected (both at national and sub-national levels) to ordinary people would be highly beneficial.
5. After the crisis: What kind of political class?

Many analyses of the Italian political class have emphasized the correspondence between changes in its recruitment and composition and key transformations of the political system as a whole (Sartori et al. 1963; Farneti 1973; Cotta 1983). Focusing especially on MPs, two fairly stable periods were easily distinguished in the history of the political class in Italy: the age of non-professional (or ‘proto-professional’) notables before the First World War, and the age of party professionals after the Second World War. The rise of political professionalism fits into a parallel trend of democratization and, most importantly for the process at hand, institutionalization of political parties.

Such a process was apparently halted in the 1990s, when Italian parties lost much of the grip they had gained on society. It would be misleading, however, to equate the crisis that occurred in the late 20th century with previous historical phases of transformation of the Italian political class, which coincided with the transition from democracy to authoritarianism and vice versa. After all, tomorrow’s possible changes and reforms are most likely to bring about different institutional arrangements without jeopardizing the founding principles of the polity. Yet, what can be the impact of such changes on the Italian political class? Could they bring about a sudden breakdown? Or just a physiological turnover?

Pareto’s idea that the replacement of the elite is a cyclical process involving the destiny of a whole generation of leaders has been evoked and adapted to account for the Italian case in a historical perspective (Cotta and Verzichelli 1996). In line with this scheme, in the 1990s, the illegal behavior of many political professionals caused the delegitimation of the whole occupational group to which they belonged – often independently from personal responsibilities. Most politicians lost credit, while societal trust shifted to non-political leaders, such as some members of the judiciary on the one hand (mainly in left-wing parties), and businessmen on the other (mainly on the right of the political spectrum). This deflationary dynamic was so rapid that change in the political class occurred as a sort of last-minute replacement. It was not a bottom-up process promoted by new aspiring elites (e.g., due to conflicts between generations), but rather a response to the need to fill a sudden vacuum at the top. Hence, at both the center and the periphery of the Italian political system, the place of political professionals was taken up by the most readily available and resourceful social actors (entrepreneurs, professionals, local notables) – natural candidates for political representation in times of weak party organizations. Some of them turned out to be ersatz politicians; others found politics a congenial environment for self-fulfillment and social advancement and thus contributed to the consolidation of a new political class.

In our view, political professionalism seems all but dead and, in the long run, political amateurs are not about to take the upper hand in Italian politics. Parties are trying hard to recover; many amateurs who succeeded in the 1990s are becoming disillusioned, and their voters too; bon gré mal gré, citizens accept the idea that politics can hardly be exempt from this ruling principle of modern societies – professionalism. Significantly, some party leaders daresay again that political professionals constitute a functional requirement of modern democracies. As Massimo D’Alema, leader of the DS and Prime Minister from 1998 to 2000, happened to declare:
“Elsewhere nobody argues that to be in politics full time is a shame, as is the case in Italian society. Nobody blames Kohl for being a politician. [...] And nobody would go to a grocer for a medical operation saying: ‘Let’s get rid of surgeons!’” (Eco 1997, 42).

Data on parliamentary candidates between 1996 and 2001 show indeed that the crisis of traditional parties has not wiped out political professionals from the scene (Di Virgilio 2002) – it has only made the resources and norms of political careers more fuzzy. Presumably, an overall expansion of political professionalism will chiefly depend on party strength, as no better device than party organizations has been invented so far to guarantee the regularity of political careers and, consequently, the occupational stability of professional politicians.

All in all, the re-professionalization of a large sector of the Italian political class is far from remote. At the same time, some other trends seem on the rise: (1) a different role of party structures in political recruitment (with an increasing weight of leaders’ decisions); (2) a growing importance of local offices (in particular, the mayoral office and regional government leadership); (3) a faster and broader access to political positions by economic and media elites (who occasionally resort to anti-political rhetoric). On the other hand, the emergence of a new political class can be seriously endangered by the persistence of traditional diseases like ‘assemblyism’ and ‘clientelism’, which are well known in all democratic countries and, especially, in the contexts of parliamentary, multiparty and ‘consensual’ systems (Pasquino 1999). Among these syndromes, the one most frequently evoked to characterize the Italian political class remains trasformismo. Originally, the term was introduced to indicate the convergence between those MPs elected by the two main political factions (the ‘right’ and the ‘left’ factions in the old Liberal elite) who decided to support the same government by creating a ‘big center’ with no real political alternative (Rogari 1998). Trasformismo has since become a derogatory word denoting the incoherent nature of politicians and the dominance of political strategy over political coherence. With this meaning, the concept is once again en vogue among observers of Italian political life. Although new leaders have emerged, their lieutenants and counselors are disproportionately drawn from among members of the ‘old’ political class regardless of their former party position.

The risk, however, is that continually indulging in such an account of the behavior of the political class can lead, as with all explanations based on national culture or personal character, to a sort of fatalism. As Sartori noted (1999), instead of simply deploiring trasformismo, sincere reformers should rather blame the unsatisfactory performance of political institutions and rules (especially the organization of government and the electoral system), which create the favorable structural context in which this “beastly Italian plague” can develop and prosper.
Bibliography


**Notes**

1 Both authors are equally responsible for the content of this essay. E. Recchi wrote the introduction and sections 1 and 2, L. Verzichelli sections 3 and 4, while the conclusion was written jointly. We are grateful to Robert A. Becker for linguistic assistance.

2 As for the original definition of the concept, Mosca was quite vague. Interpreters tend to distinguish in his works a political class in the sense of ‘ruling class’, and a political class *stricto sensu* comprising only the top decision-makers. While the concept spread out quickly in the Italian public debate, a third and different meaning prevailed: the political class as the set of stable incumbents of political offices (Bobbio 1996, 183-4). Following in Mosca’s footsteps, Robert Michels reacted against this more specific formulation (Michels 1936, xiv). The definition used in this book is indeed closer to the revised understanding of the concept than to the elitists’ original view.

3 However, the Communist Party had already launched, before the scandals, a program of organizational renewal aimed at reducing significantly the number of political professionals among its representatives (Baccetti 1997, 65-9).

4 For a review of definitions of political professionalism and professionalization, see Perulli (1995).

5 As in past research, we will use data on the Lower Chamber (*Camera dei Deputati*), as this was the only elective branch of parliament in the monarchic era. In the republican era, as both chambers share about the same electoral system and constitutional functions, the more numerous *Camera* can be considered a representative sample of the whole universe of Italian MPs.

6 According to some historians, already at the beginning of the 20th century the prominence of a large number of MPs depended on their political office rather than on extra-political status (Pombeni 1993, 70ff.). The
early semi-professional politicians were notables that, once elected to the legislature, used to emphasize the political identity they achieved as parliamentarians rather than their ascribed prestige in local communities. Generally speaking, thus, political professionalism was at first favored by the State appropriation of social power rather than by the democratization of political recruitment.

Biographical records of the fascist political class can be found in Missori (1986). Unfortunately, to our knowledge, this data collection has not been analyzed systematically yet.

Parliamentary turnover was already high in 1992 (around 40 percent both in the Chamber and the Senate). In 1994, it reached 71 percent in the Chamber (around 60 percent in the Senate). Albeit lower, the rates of 1996 and 2001 are over the average of the republican legislatures (around 40 percent in both parliamentary branches).

In 1993, the proportional system was replaced by a mixed system, first-past-the-post for 75 percent of the seats, proportionality for the distribution (with regional lists) of the remaining 25 percent, being valid for both the Chamber and the Senate – apart from some apparently minor differences in the proportional quota which, however, turned out to be relevant in 1994 (the first election based on the new system) and 1996. For a discussion of mixed systems, see Katz (1996).

The electoral system was not included in the Constitution, and this made the possibility of reforms easier thereafter, like the unsuccessful attempt to introduce a majority bonus in 1953 and the reforms of the nineties.

Because of this phenomenon, currently there are some 150,000 laws in Italy – about fifty times more than in Britain and thirty times more than in Germany.

The precise number varied due to frequent changes in constituency boundaries. The non-elective Senate was huge and very variable in size as well, since the Statuto allowed the appointment of an unlimited number of Senators to represent 21 social categories. All attempts to reform the composition of Parliament before the rise of Fascism were unsuccessful (Merlini 1995).

More precisely, there are 630 deputies and 315 elected senators – a size determined by a constitutional amendment of 1963. To this number one must add a small group of appointed senators, because every President of the Republic can appoint five de jure senators. In turn, heads of State become senators for life at the end of their mandates.

In 1993, a reform of the electoral system in local government introduced the direct election of mayors, presidents of provinces, and presidents of regions. About the impact of these recent institutional reforms see below.

In the Communist Party functionaries used to earn as much as specialized blue collar workers in the metalworking industry (Pacifici 1983, 74). Communist MPs were asked to devolve to their party half of their parliamentary allowance, and local representatives to devolve their whole salary, in exchange for a wage paid by the party. This regulation is no longer applied by the PDS in all regions (Baccetti 1997, 215-16).

Furthermore, the DC, PSI and the minor center-left parties were highly factionalized, so that each leader had his/her own ‘cultural association’ or ‘think tank’ which worked as a personal apparatus.

The largest trade union, the left-wing CGIL, had “at least 7,000 full-time employees” in 1976; it then appeared to be the biggest trade union bureaucracy in Europe. Considering only full-time functionaries (i.e., excluding secretaries and administrative workers without political tasks), a more recent estimate indicates some 6-7,000 people as the universe of Italian trade unionists (Giovannini 1997, 180). Compared to the rest of the Italian political class, trade unionists present themselves as individuals of lower class origins and lower education – i.e., closer to a working class image than party politicians (Battaglia 1971; Mattioli and Pizzi Ammassari 1982). Nonetheless, less than one third of them ever had a working class occupation (Giovannini 1997). Given their early involvement in trade unions and the mobility among different political offices (in parties, local authorities, and so on), it seems reasonable to consider them part of the political class (ibid., 184-6).

Until recently, ministers and junior ministers were almost always drawn from among members of parliament (Calise and Mannheimer 1982). Since the eighties, the number of non-elected ministers has increased (most of them were, in any case, party politicians). With the ‘technocrat’ governments of the early nineties (Ciampi and Dini cabinets especially), this phenomenon has been much more evident (Cotta and Verzichelli 1996). However, also ‘political’ prime ministers like Berlusconi and Prodi resorted to some extra-political personalities, above all in the staff of junior ministers and the financial ministries.

For research on MPs see Cotta (1979 and 1983); Cotta and Di Palma (1986); Mastropaolo (1993a and 1996); Cotta and Verzichelli (1996); Verzichelli (1995 and 1998); Cotta et. al. (2000). On local politicians
see Barberis (1983); Melis and Martinotti (1988); Bettin and Magnier (1989 and 1991); Cazzola (1991); Bettin (1993).

20 In 1996, MPs with a background in both party and local elective offices made up 40 percent of the total in the Rifondazione Comunista (RCI), 59 percent in the PDS, and 62 percent in the AN. Among Forza Italia representatives, they counted for no more than 13 percent; much higher is their number among the MPs of the Lega Nord (44 percent), which thus proved to have become a party with structured career norms. For a more detailed description see Verzichelli (1998).

21 In general, MPs elected in the center-left cartel are more often drawn from among public employees, while their colleagues elected in the center-right coalitions are mostly recruited from the private sector (Verzichelli 1998).

22 Also in the past, lawyers formed the largest occupational group within the ruling elite of the MSI – the extreme right-wing party from which Alleanza Nazionale originated (De Felice 1996, 264).

23 The proportion of women within the constituent assembly of 1946 was only 3.6 percent. It rose slowly until 1979 (7.9 percent in the Camera); reached its peak in 1987 (12.5%), but slid back to 8.4 percent in 1992. In 1994, women MPs reached 15 percent, but only by virtue of a law that enforced the alternation of men and women in the rigid lists of candidates for proportional voting. Once this clause disappeared, there was a return to ‘normal’ female under-representation.

24 The proportion of Italian members of the European Parliament with a simultaneous mandate as national MP is the highest in Europe: 30.8 (1979), 20.9 (1984), 30.8 (1989), and 45.9 percent in 1994. Dual mandates are quite exceptional in Strasbourg.

25 According to article 65 of the Constitution, ordinary law determines the cases of incompatibility with the office of MP. Currently, members of regional councils, mayors of towns with more than 20,000 inhabitants, and presidents of provincial administrations cannot be elected to parliament. The same is true for members of the Higher Council of Justice.

26 In the republican Constitution, article 62 sets two parliamentary sessions which start the first working day of October and February respectively. Specific rules of duration and work organization are provided by the Regulations of the Chamber and the Senate.

27 Article 69 of the Constitution simply states that every MP receives a certain amount (indennità parlamentare) but leaves the regulation of this issue to ordinary law.

28 Recently, a special deduction called ‘absence fine’ was introduced to reduce the daily allowance for those MPs who do not participate in parliamentary work.

29 A first special committee (commissione Bozzi) for constitutional reforms was inaugurated in 1983. After ten years (1992), another committee was formed (commissione De Mita-Iotti) but it could not conclude its work due to the anticipated ending of the legislature in 1994. A special committee for institutional reforms was finally appointed by both chambers after the election of 1996 (commissione D’Alema). This committee elaborated an organic reform of the Constitution, addressing various issues from the electoral system to federalism, the organization of justice and, above all, a new form of government. Among other things, the direct election of the President of the Republic was introduced in the draft approved by the Committee. Parliament, however, did not process the whole package of reforms, and even this attempt to modernize the 1948 constitution failed. Reforms are still on the political agenda: at the end of 1999, another small but significant change was made by introducing the direct election of regional presidents but political instability and volatility within the party system make the perspectives for larger reform designs very uncertain.

30 A first referendum, held in 1991, abolished the preferential vote for election to the Camera dei Deputati. In 1993, another referendum abolished a significant part of the electoral law for the Senate. Both referenda had a very large popular participation, though some major parties explicitly invited their voters to desert the polls. The abrogations proposed were supported by an extremely wide majority of the electorate.

31 As a specification of this model, Parsons’ (1967a, 381; 1967b, 337ff.) insight that political power may be subject to inflation could be usefully rediscovered.

32 This argument, which D’Alema attributes to Benedetto Croce, is, in fact, much older. In his treatise Della vita civile, Matteo Palmieri, a Florentine political writer of the early 15th century, justified political professionalization in much the same way: “It is silly that the shoe-maker suggests how to make laws, how to govern the republic, or how to wage war and it is reasonable to ask physicians only about medical matters” (Palmieri 1982, 68).