

REVIEW OF MATTHEW EVANGELISTA (ED.),
*ITALY FROM CRISIS TO CRISIS: POLITICAL ECONOMY,
SECURITY AND SOCIETY IN THE 21ST CENTURY*,
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Italy from Crisis to Crisis begins with an irony. Its very title, with a double emphasis on “crisis”, hints at the persistence of an Italian politics that has been perpetually understood as in crisis, and nods to Luigi Graziano and Sidney Tarrow’s *La crisi italiana*, published by Einaudi forty years ago. Matthew Evangelista centers this excellent sets of essays on Italy and on crisis, asking why analyses of Italian politics so frequently recur to the language of crisis.

Evangelista’s introductory chapter provides an overview of Italian post-war politics and society, and establishes the context for the chapters that follow; the introduction is well worth reading on its own for a brief, succinct overview of recent Italian political history. The chapter emphasizes that Italy has been successful in adapting to major changes and challenges across the postwar period, including the collapse and reconfiguration of its party system, multiple changes and adjustments in its electoral system, a nearly complete transformation of its economy (and the demise of the *latifundia* agricultural system), institution of reforms regarding divorce, abortion, same-sex marriage, and other issues related to “secularization, modernization, and the (slowly) changing role of women and gender in society and politics” (6). As Evangelista observes, *eppur si muove*.

In a review of limited space, it is difficult to do justice to every chapter in an edited collection. I discuss five chapters: two chapters address the political party system as crisis, and the Italian economy as trajectory, and three chapters address Italian foreign policy and security and energy concerns. These are exemplary of the focus and quality of the range of the

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volume, which includes additional work on the Mafia, youth politics and (un)employment, the Italian media, and immigration, among other foci.

Sidney Tarrow addresses the issue of party system crisis in “The Canary in the Coal Mine: Movements, Parties, and Populists in the Italian Crises”. Tarrow focuses on the Italian party system which, if not in crisis, has certainly been in transition. He identifies three major crisis moments: 1) the late 1960s, with the *autunno caldo* and mass political movement mobilization; 2) the 1992-1994 crises of political corruption and scandal; and 3) the years 2008-2016, with the rise of the *Movimento Cinque Stelle* (MS5) – all of which were “successive episodes in the de-structuration of the party system” (35). These plural crises in the Italian party system, Tarrow argues, make Italy not *sui generis* but the leading edge of what is likely to transpire elsewhere, placing Italy as the warning “canary in the coal mine”. The rise of new social movements and their presence within political parties transformed those political parties that were responsive and, for the 1960s and 1970s, able to contain social movement contention within the established party system. Established major parties, however, could not contain the actual political crises that ultimately destroyed them. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the demise of the Italian Communist Party; the *Tangentopoli* party financing scandal that resulted in former Prime Minister Bettino Craxi fleeing to Tunisia, a scandal that extended well beyond the Italian Socialist Party; the electoral collapse of the major parties and the eventual demise of the Christian Democrats all constituted major crises for the party system, which has fragmented and not yet realigned.

These crises reinforced a widening sense that political parties as parties were no longer capable of governing; an anti-party ethos and the use of the referendum tool for direct legislation further undermined “the traditional party system, but [...] could not lay the groundwork for a new one” (44). Into this opening stepped Silvio Berlusconi, supported by his private media empire, and *La Lega*, “a party born as a movement – or, rather, as an amalgam of movements coming from different parts of the region” (45). *La Lega* ultimately succeeded electorally at the expense of the Christian Democrats, further damaging any prospects of a return to a bipolar party system. The 2008 economic crisis and its aftermath opened further opportunities for new parties, particularly for the *M5S*, with concomitant negative consequences for the *Partito Democratico* and any possibilities that the Italian left could reestablish itself in a restabilized party system. It remains to be seen whether party system dealignment in Italy is a picture of the future for West Europe more generally.

Hopkins and Lynch’s chapter, “Disembedding the Italian Economy”, follows Tarrow’s argument in showing how the collapse of the Italian party system created a political and ultimately social void that made it difficult to

provide the necessary civil society support for economic reforms. Emphasizing the necessity of joining social relations with economic policies, in this case, Italian structural reforms required by the European Union, Hopkins and Lynch argue that the structural requirements disrupted economic behaviors, embedded in social relations that had accommodated previous arrangements, leaving Italy in the “economic doldrums” (66). The authors preface their analysis with a brief account of Italian postwar economic history, including Italy’s *miracolo economico* and the *Tangentopoli* scandal that revealed the extent of political and economic corruption among Italy’s governing elites. Now in the “Second Republic”, Italy suffers from a stagnant GDP, increases in income inequality, and persistent, high levels of poverty.

Data-rich and well-argued, the chapter explains the failure of economic reforms, identifying four negative trajectories: 1) policy liberalization that delinked market regulation from central administrative control, without detaching the underlying political patterns that supported pre-reform economic policies; 2) liberalizing the labor market without developing the appropriate social and political institutions necessary for sustaining labor market reforms (and actual working people); and 3) changes in the judicial system and limiting judicial interventions concerning the economy, with “the striking example ... [of] the law effectively decriminalizing false accounting”, with the result that fraudulent financial activity became re-embedded in “often corrupt and clientelistic networks” (75). A fourth trajectory involves changes in the social welfare system and success in separating “the allocation and delivery of welfare state benefits from the clientelist networks of exchange in which they had been mired for most of the post-war period” (77); the family as an institution has long compensated for Italy’s comparatively weak social welfare system. Noting that Italy entirely lacked a universal unemployment coverage system until the 2000s (77), Hopkins and Lynch conclude that, as for the first three trajectories, social welfare economic reform has suffered from the lack of a corresponding reform providing the political foundation necessary for its success. In short, these trajectories evidence challenges to the Italian government, if not posing actual crises.

Italy from Crisis to Crisis is unique, among volumes of this type, in its inclusion of multiple chapters on Italian foreign policy and security concerns. Elisabetta Brighi places Italian foreign policy in five crisis contexts: “a crisis of world order, a crisis within the model of European liberal democracy, a crisis within Italian domestic politics, a crisis within parties and not least a crisis of ideas” (106). In these contexts, Italy, “the first of the small powers, the last of the great powers” (107), has struggled to maintain its position. With a shrinking diplomatic corps and foreign affairs budget, Italian foreign policy finds itself precariously positioned on a party system that

is increasingly unstable, unable to manage the transition from bipolarity to a dealignment or to find secure ground in any tradition or outlook – conservative, internationalist democratic, or liberal. Brighi argues that Italy, “rather than founding [its foreign] relations with the world on entirely new premises, since 2011 [...] has pursued a blend of foreign policy which simply folded old and new elements into the same mix”, adopting a “mercantilist approach, signaling a full and committed embracing of the forces driving economic globalization”, an ultimately conservative path and arguably positioning Italy poorly in regard to the current and future crises (111-113).

The incomplete transformation of Italian foreign policy is attributable to the lingering legacies of the Cold War and “the breakdown of the so-called “First Republic” (121). Fabrizio Coticchia, in “The Transformation of Italian Defense Policy”, identifies major changes in Italian defense policy at the turn to the Second Republic: the institution of an all-volunteer army, replacing mandatory conscription; the emphasis on peace-keeping missions and service as “an external security provider”; and the “interoperability among services” (122-123), including the *Carabinieri*, among other changes. Nonetheless, challenges of finance and budgeting, the disjunction between a peace-related defense legacy and actual military combat involvement, and the lack of serious public discussion, among the mass public and in parliament, are persistent challenges. To a certain extent, Coticchia argues that the current state of Italian defense policy is not one of crisis (and is unrelated to the financial crisis (131)), and raises instead the question of Italian capacity to face crises of defense and military and foreign policy in the future.

Finally, Elisabetta Bini’s chapter on Italian energy policies, while not strictly focused on foreign policy, nonetheless fits well with the more explicit chapters. With few domestic energy sources, Italy’s energy policy found new opportunities following the end of the Cold War, connecting with new markets previously foreclosed. These opportunities, however, increased Italian energy dependency in ways, Bini argues, that made Italy more exposed and “much more likely to face an energy crisis” than other European countries (138). Bini provides a postwar history of the development of Italian energy policy, which was initially driven by Italy’s postwar economic reconstruction needs, political elite preferences for state control of energy policy, and United States’ interests, all of which had an impact on decisions concerning electricity, oil, and nuclear power. In particular, Italian dependence on imported oil resulted in an actual crisis in 1973, when fuel oil for heating and gasoline were unavailable, and the state issued prohibitions on driving private cars, boating, or flying on Sundays. “The oil crisis thus accelerated growing and widespread social tensions and political instability” (143). Bini provides a history of the various Italian state agencies

involved in the energy sector and finds, despite changes, that oil dependence continues to make Italy “particularly vulnerable to the numerous crises that have characterized Russia-Ukraine relations over the last years” (148). It is not clear how foreign policy has addressed – or has been able to address – energy issues that are related to Italy’s domestic security and its defense.

Although the chapters in *Italy from Crisis to Crisis* do not share “a uniform theoretical framework” (6), they nonetheless cohere and provide a clear sense of the challenges that Italy faces and the difficulties Italy will have in addressing them. Students and scholars of Italian politics will find the book useful, in reading it in its entirety or in reading individual chapters; each chapter is sufficiently strong and distinct that it can be read on its own. Teresa Cappiali’s chapter on the Italian immigration issue, for example, provides necessary context for understanding what is clearly reaching crisis status. Kenneth Roberts summarizes the volume, making the case that “what is distinctively ‘Italian’ in the contemporary crisis [...] is best understood when viewed through the lens of a comparative perspective” (235). One might quibble that the book has space to include additional chapters on, e.g., agricultural politics and the economy, and on women’s rights and political representation, but *non si può avere tutto*, and the range of scholarship in this excellent book certainly suffices.

Italy from Crisis to Crisis was completed before the 2018 Italian parliamentary elections that produced a right-wing, nationalist, populist coalition government, and the 2019 European Parliament elections, where parties of the left fared quite well. Until August 2019, Italy was governed by the two-party coalition of *La Lega* and the *Movimento Cinque Stelle*,¹ involving considerable disarray, intra-cabinet conflict, and the miscalculated chantage to the governing coalition by *La Lega*’s Matteo Salvini, resulting in his party’s exclusion from government and replacement by a coalition of *M5S* and the *Partito Democratico* led by Giuseppe Conte. Challenged by the flow of refugees and immigrants (and currently responding badly by prosecuting those who would help)² and exposed to climate change, Italy will face additional future crises for which it may be poorly prepared.

The debate about crisis runs throughout the volume. Evangelista suggests that Italy may be in crisis, but “*eppur si muove*” (3): Italy continues, from challenge to challenge, managing and adapting in response to crises and yet continuing to be resilient. Tarrow, in contrast, sees Italy in crisis, particularly because the Italian political party system lacks the necessary

¹ See KIRCHGAEUSSNER 2018.

² See DE MAIO 2019.

stability to manage the economic, social, and international challenges that Italy currently faces; Italy's inability is the example – the canary in the coal mine – of what may be the future for many West European countries. *Italy from Crisis to Crisis* offers the debate but does not resolve it. Is the best that one can say is that Italy is in crisis? Or does “Italy’s resilience in the face of multiple crises ... [offer] a more promising, positive model” (27)? *E se si muove, dove?*

REFERENCES

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