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Piero Ignazi (2012) *Forza senza legittimità. Il vicolo cieco dei partiti* (Roma–Bari: Laterza), XVI pp., 138 pp., ISBN 978-88-420-9596-5

Because of their central role in modern politics, political parties have attracted the attention of many political scientists. But parties are not only research subjects. They are also recurring topics in public debates, mostly in democratic countries, where they are what actually make the functioning of the chain of delegation from voters to political rulers possible.

The underlining of this unavoidable part played by parties in the process of political representation together with the recognition of a widespread loss of legitimacy that parties have suffered in the eyes of a great many citizens of democratic countries are the starting points of Ignazi's book. The questions at issue – we may annotate – would be: 'How has the development of these two contrasting facts been possible?' 'What can parties do to defend the former and cope with the latter?'

The introduction makes the topic explicit. A puzzle is put forward: in spite of the disaffection and lack of esteem from both outside (public opinion) and inside (members), political parties seem to be stronger than they have ever been in the past. They are 'richer' and have a greater control on society; from weaker, but quite valued organizations, they have become modern leviathans, but not much appreciated. The rest of the book gives a picture of the evolution of parties and of their public role since their birth and of the road that has led to the current situation. Furthermore, an analysis of the challenges parties are facing and, probably, will have to face is provided.

The argument is structured into four chapters and a brief conclusion. The first chapter focuses on the 'long and rugged path' (p. 3) towards legitimacy. Ignazi moves from faraway. He points out how the etymological origin of the word 'party' recalls the idea of division, of partial. Philosophers in ancient Greece, Catholic thinkers (Thomas Aquinas) and secular doctrines (Hobbes) fought for a long time against what the concept of 'party'/'faction' implies. The liberal thought was the first strongly to advocate the value of pluralism of opinions. However, acceptance was anything but immediate. Both the French revolutionists and the counter-revolutions preached the need for the unity of the social body. The US founders and others (think of Tocqueville) acknowledged the natural character of divisions in politics, but surely without enthusiasm. Only at the end of the nineteenth century did political parties conquer a more valued position through two different paths: in parliament (factions of notables) and in society (socialist parties).

However (and we move to the second chapter), political parties became the central actors of politics only in the last century. Even the parties of the authoritarian and totalitarian regimes between the world wars were signs of that. Nonetheless, it was with the democratic mass parties – socialist and confessional – that they acquired their ‘classic’ model, later adopted by other parties. As Ignazi states, they established a number of organizational principles that are often still valid: enrolment of members; local sections; decision rules. As for this, the bottom-up principle became dominant. Also, the subsequent changes the parties experienced from the 1960s onwards are analyzed. The points are the well-known transformation into catch-all parties – parallel to the transformation of the former industrial societies into post-industrial ones – and, eventually, into cartel parties or, to use the words of the author, State-centered parties. Ignazi also takes into consideration the birth and the results of ‘post-materialist’ parties (Greens) and the new right-wing and populist parties. In this respect, Italy was an exception: the particular nature of the party system blocked the changes until the fall of the Berlin Wall.

In the third chapter, the author deals with the main traits of the State-centered parties by referring to the famous distinction made by Richard Katz and Peter Mair between ‘party on the ground’, ‘party in the central office’ and ‘party in the public office’ (in the electoral assemblies). While the main elements of the first trait – membership and local offices – have lost importance (the new media changed the relationship between leaders and public opinion, which is now far less mediated, and the enrolment of members is a merely symbolic resource, much more than it was in the past), parties have strengthened their position with regard to the other two traits: public financing has become more important, decisions are taken by small groups of party prominents and parliamentary parties are more able to exert influence by means of patronage. It is worth noting that, even if Italy has followed the general trends in the last twenty years (with some inter-party differences), there remains a very particular point: the personnel of the central offices grew until the *mani pulite* scandal in the early 1990s and then, unlike what has happened in other countries, it has decreased.

In the following chapter Ignazi, after restating that parties are still inescapable organizations, analyses the challenges they have faced or face: social movements and neocorporativism; direct democracy; deliberative democracy. According to him, this latter would be the most ‘threatening’, but, on the whole, parties remain able to face all of them. They are ‘officialized’ public agencies with strong structures that draw resources from the State. Nonetheless, the democratic environment would force them to be ‘democratic’ and open to their bases. Just recently, with respect to internal members, the loss of esteem has seen some inverse trends, but with the exception of the Italian case.

How parties will be able to manage the dilemma between strength and legitimacy is the puzzle that the conclusions of the book underline once more.

To conclude, the work of Ignazi is a clear and well-painted picture of the process that has taken political parties from being unpopular entities to the very strong organizations that lead modern democracies, and of the challenges they have faced in this process and have still to face. Moreover, the book analyses well the Italian case in a broad and accurate comparative perspective. The arguments are scientifically grounded but always clear. The book proves to be a lively study of very important aspects and problems of democratic politics and participation, and can be seen also as an introduction (though not superficial) to further in-depth analyses.

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