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Italian Political Science today: Has the profession changed in the last ten years?

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Abstract

This contribution analyzes the opportunities that the 2010 reform of higher education (Gelmini reform) created for Italian political scientists to form departments centered on the social sciences that would encourage greater experimentation with degree programs more attuned to the needs of a changing society and better able to chart the evolving nature of contemporary politics. It underscores the difficulty of making this transition, but also highlights the attempts formally made in this direction. It further analyzes the positive impact that the same reform has had on the internationalization and professionalization of the younger generations of political scientists. It also warns, however, against the promotion of an understanding of academic career that may induce them to detach themselves from other aspects of the profession that have to do with the management of university structures and the broad promotion of political science, nationally and internationally.

1. Introduction

In this brief contribution I will analyze how Italian political science has adapted to the new opportunities that opened up following the university reform of 2010 (law 240/2010)¹ and how it tackled the new challenges that derived from it. My contribution is based on my personal experience as coordinator of a degree program in International Studies and on my exposure, in various capacities, to international experiences. It is therefore, to some extent, impressionistic in nature and based, if you will, upon privileged observations.

My argument is that the new liberty that ensued from the cancellation of the old *Facoltà* and the creation of the new *Dipartimenti* resulted in a *potentially* greater variety of educational offers in political science, which has only in part been exploited but has nevertheless posed a dilemma to departments as to whether to retain their traditional multi-disciplinarity or rather specialize in one of the many sub-fields of political science. In other words, the new departments were placed before a choice: whether to simply

¹ Law 30 December 2010, n. 240 available is commonly referred to as the “Gelmini law” from the name of the then Ministry of University and Research; available at: <https://www.camera.it/parlam/leggi/10240l.htm>.

change their status and retain the same disciplinary configuration as before or (try to) acquire a more distinctive political science profile or even pursue innovative cross-fertilizations with other social science disciplines. I will suggest that some departments have pursued the latter strategy and that we begin to observe an interesting diversification of programs in political science.

The same reform also introduced the centralized *Abilitazione Scientifica Nazionale*, which replaced the old system of certification and promotion managed by the individual universities. This reform, too, has presented political science departments with interesting opportunities that may or may not be fully exploited. It has, on the one hand, caused an acceleration of careers in line with what happens abroad and in other disciplines and, on the other, created *expectations* of promotion (still dependent upon the availability of resources at the local level) that are bound to be disappointed and create frustration. As a consequence, the profession has somewhat changed, in part approaching international standards that bear the promise of a more dynamic academia, but in part still suffering from resource constraints that may choke this positive evolution. Therefore, the overall picture is a mixed one, full of great promises but also fraught with dangers with which the newer generations of political scientists will have to deal.

In the following sections, I will discuss whether Italian political science has taken advantage of these opportunities by innovating at least in the academic organization of its degree programs (Section 1); whether it has updated and streamlined the promotion and career progression of its members according to international standards (Section 2); and, finally, whether it has taken measures to help upcoming scholars adapt to the many requirements of their future academic profession (Section 3). Section 4 will assess whether together these changes have induced a new awareness in the younger generations of what is required of them in order to compete in today's academic world, but also of what is needed to carry forward the continuing upgrading of scientific standards in today's academia. The final section will briefly recap the main insights.

2. The transformation of *Facoltà* into *Dipartimenti*: the quest for innovation

In 2010 the so-called Gelmini reform abolished the old *Facoltà* that presided over the organization of teaching in universities, and created new *Dipartimenti*, which differed from the old ones in that they now coordinated both research and teaching. The innovations introduced by this reform to the centralized and hierarchical “continental model” (Regini 2020), were aimed at granting higher education institutions the flexibility to be more responsive to the needs of a changing society. Departments were encouraged to organize the production and dissemination of knowledge so as to adapt their educational supply to quickly changing societal demands, in turn due to transformations in technologies, problems and orientations. Many old *Facoltà di Scienze Politiche* – in the plural, to indicate the many disciplines that, according to the traditional understanding of politics as little more than the application of constitutional rules and procedures, supposedly equipped students with the tools to understand politics – changed their names to emphasize other, until then underplayed features. Several Departments inserted “culture”, “communication” or “international studies” in their names and most of them more strongly signaled an underlying unity with the other social sciences as residing in their empirical and

applied nature, thus distancing the study of politics from that of mere formal norms and procedures.

Of the 52 university structures – mostly now called *Dipartimenti*, but some still quaintly called *Facoltà* or otherwise indicated as *Centri, Istituti* or *Scuole* – that today host teachings in political science (SPS/04),² 9 retain their original label “*Scienze Politiche*” and are characterized by a large prevalence of juridical studies; 27 are indicated as “*Scienze Politiche e Sociali*” or “*Scienze Sociali e Politiche*” or other similar locutions that stress the common roots of political science and the other social sciences (typically by adding “culture”, “communication”, “international studies” to the name); and 16 belong to departments and other types of structure that do not nominally relate to the social sciences but that still see the need to integrate their educational offer with teachings in political science (typically, departments of Architecture, Engineering, Planning, and Economics).³ The transformation from the previous situation is indicative of a *new sensibility*: the departments in which political science is most central are now those in which interactions between the social sciences are *at least programmatically* most intense.

At the same time, the procedures for updating the degree programs through which knowledge is provided and certified still need to be approved by the Ministry of Higher Education (MIUR, now MUR), which significantly slows down and homogenizes the actual supply of new degree programs. In theory, departments could now pursue new developments in the social sciences deriving from relevant international dynamics, expanding communication technologies and the overabundant availability of data which in turn impact on the study of political behavior, political institutions and political methodology. Thanks to their new freedom, departments could in theory emphasize their relative specialization and pursue interesting experiments in the hybridization of knowledge with other (social) sciences or they could rather carve a distinctive profile, specializing in communication studies, public opinion analysis or in the study of international political phenomena, just to give a few examples. This change in strategy, however, was initially hampered by the rush with which it was implemented and is still taking place slowly as disciplinary factions and corporatist interests make adaptation particularly viscous (Giuliani, 2012).⁴

Moreover, the curricular formats used by MUR for the approval of new degree courses and the re-accreditation of existing ones, coupled with the existing classification of the disciplines (partially updated in 2016 through the introduction of new *settori scientifico-disciplinari* and the regrouping of existing ones), sometimes do not give sufficient latitude in experimenting with new course offers. One of the main innovations in the realm of the social sciences has lately been the creation of a degree program in Data

² Whether taught by political scientists or others remains to be seen.

³ If Economics, as I think would be most appropriate, is also counted among the social sciences, the number of departments that at least in their names acknowledge their common roots in the social sciences would be 31 while those that do not are reduced to 21, representing respectively 60% and 40% of all departments. Own calculations on official MUR data.

⁴ With regard to the university of Milan, Giuliani states: “Symbolically it could have represented a laboratory for interdisciplinary research and teaching, and partly it even managed to fulfill this ambition, but as a matter of fact it was mostly a very complex organization with clear disciplinary factions and constituencies, which were the dominant actors in each decision regarding the distribution of resources” (Giuliani 2012: 2). For a rounded assessment of the Gelmini reform, attention should be placed not only on BA degree programs but also on MA degree programs.

Sciences aimed at training scholars in mining and analyzing large pools of data. More frequently, however, despite their relative flexibility, ministerial formats are only blunt instruments of experimentation as they allow those disciplines that are already strongly rooted in existing degree programs to be largely present in many other curricula, thus limiting the room for innovation. The adaptation of knowledge to new political, social and technological developments has, therefore, been more difficult than was initially envisioned.

3. New career progression: changing expectations and increasing fragmentation of knowledge

The second major innovation introduced by the Gelmini reform was the introduction of a new mechanism of career progression. Before the reform, scholars could progress in their career by applying for jobs in the higher category only when advertised locally by universities. This system gave rise to negotiations between universities aimed at giving the possibility to their most promising scholars to obtain, if not an immediate external promotion, at least the reasonable hope of soon being promoted internally. Of the two statutory winners of the old *concorsi*, one would get the job while the other would acquire certification in the higher category (akin but not identical to today's habilitation) that could then be used by other universities to offer her/him a promotion in that category. Using an economic metaphor, we could say that, in addition to issuing an immediately cashable promotion, the system created a secondary market of promotions which could then be used to obtain a position in the higher category at other universities. Both before and after the reform, mobility between universities was very limited,⁵ but what has significantly changed since then is that with the new system the number of habilitated scholars has significantly grown. Still, only a few of them will be able to obtain a promotion at their current or at another university.

This has created much frustration, but a second consequence also derived. The more open and frequent system of national habilitation (ASN) – every four months it is possible to apply for habilitation in the higher category provided that certain criteria and productivity thresholds are cleared – has induced many more scholars, once marginal to the inter-university web of negotiations, to try and obtain habilitation, thus further inflating the ranks of the hopeful. The current one is certainly a more equitable and open system, given that many scholars who left academia to pursue other careers or went abroad to find a job at some foreign university wish to obtain Italian habilitation in order to try and compete for a university position in Italy. To some extent this has favored a greater circulation of scholars and the importation of scholars, Italian and foreign, with interesting specializations, unusual career paths and significant language skills. It has also led to a certain homogenization of the Italian system with career progression systems more frequently present abroad. In sum, it has led to the creation of a veritable international market of political scientists.

⁵ In fact, it might have been higher before the Gelmini reform at least as far as internal mobility is concerned. What has increased since then has been international mobility, particularly through incentives for attracting to the Italian university system international scholars and young Italians who had decided to begin their careers abroad. This is, in itself, no small feat.

The combined effect of a greater circulation of scholars and greater ease in comparing scholarly achievements has gone hand in hand with a certain homogenization of evaluative standards in Italy and abroad. Italian academia, at least as far as political science is concerned, is increasingly aware of the standards that are prevalent abroad even if these are domestically still rather unpopular. Two instances stand out. The first is the creeping use of bibliometric indicators (impact factor of the articles or journals in which they are published, h and g indices according to Google Scholar or Publish or Perish, number of publications in Scopus- or WoS-ranked journals) to evaluate the scientific production of Italian political scientists *even if* the use of these indicators is formally excluded by ministerial regulations. The second is the increasing acceptance of doctoral dissertations composed of three or four published (or accepted for publication) journal articles instead of the conventional monograph. This new practice is increasingly associated with the “modern”, structured type of doctoral program now prevalent as opposed to the “traditional” one based on the exclusive relationship between student and supervisor (Ballarino et al 2021: 14).

These practices have been adopted by some social science departments in Italy – particularly in Economics and increasingly also in Sociology departments – while they are quickly becoming the rule abroad. A corollary of these practices is the increased relevance given to journal articles as opposed to book chapters and even edited or monographic volumes in the periodic assessment of the Italian scientific political science production. The Italian “research assessment exercise” (*Valutazione della Qualità della Ricerca*, VQR) has adopted a system for ranking academic journals similar (though not identical) to Scopus or WoS, known as “*classe A*” or first-rate journals, which supposedly guarantee higher standards of impartiality and a blind review of the articles published therein. Moreover, it is now inconceivable for an Italian political scientist not to have earned a PhD in political science at home or abroad and not to be a regular attendee and paper-giver at major international conferences.⁶

These developments were in their infancy ten years ago, when the reform was launched, and still only a hope two years later at the time of the roundtable, organized by IPS among senior scholars representing six major Italian universities where political science has a strong tradition, to assess the first consequences of the reform. At that time, Pierangelo Isernia illustrated the choice of the small but active group of political scientists of the then Facoltà di Scienze Politiche at the University of Siena to look for partners “whose methodological underpinnings were as homogeneous as possible (given the available options, of course) to ours. We did so for two reasons or, if you like, under a couple of working hypotheses” (Isernia, 2012: 8). These “working hypotheses” reflected, first, a precise methodological and scientific orientation aimed at bringing political science closer to the other empirical social sciences and the desire to make the study of politics in Siena attractive also for international students who would then need to compete in other academic systems. The second hypothesis was that, in the future, the results of the evaluation system for both teaching and research would “play a greater role in allocating resources, in influencing recruitment and in catalyzing projects and

⁶ For a comparative analysis of these research assessment exercises, see the special issue published in this journal in 2017 with contributions on the UK, France, the Netherlands and Italy (Piattoni 2017, and the articles by Flinders, Andeweg, Paradeise and Checchi).

initiatives. Any future Department will actively compete in an environment in which ... the results of the evaluation process will determine its growth” (Isernia, 2012: 8-9). It seems to me that both hypotheses have been, against all odds and despite much resistance from many quarters, borne out by facts and that Italian political science has managed to internationalize to a remarkable degree and become more competitive also thanks to the incentives inherent in the evaluation processes.

The upshot of all this is that Italian political scientists, particularly the younger ones, are now more internationally oriented and more “marketable”, but also more specialized than their elders. Contrary to what was common an academic generation (or two) ago⁷ – that a good political scientist was supposed to be able to orientate him/herself in all sub-fields of political science and to never stick to just one research question for too long – today’s scholars are much more specialized, interact with smaller but more closely-knit communities of scholars pursuing similar research questions, and publish more in highly specialized peer-reviewed, high-impact factor journals. In other words, young political scientists are more “professional”, more specialized and more internationalized than the older generations, but also a lot narrower in their interests and knowledge of the discipline.

A remarkable consequence follows. While a generation or two ago Italian political science covered all aspects of the discipline with some degree of competence, it now suffers from remarkable gaps just as it is increasingly present in a few remarkable areas of specialization. It is as if the scientific study of politics in Italy has fragmented into many different fields of expertise and research agendas and, while contributing to cover all areas of the discipline together with foreign political science communities through international networks, has ended up suffering from evident gaps domestically. In other words, the diagnosis of the state of political science offered by Gabriel Almond (1988) – that political scientists now sit at separate tables and are incapable of, or uninterested in, talking to one another – could be applied to Italian political science as well, where a greater degree of specialization and internationalization has been acquired at the cost of a loss of general relevance and domestic debates.

4. Future challenges: making political science more innovative, relevant and visible

I would like to conclude this contribution by pointing to some new challenges that face Italian political scientists today. We know that the three missions of higher education are teaching, researching and contributing to society. The first two are to some degree obvious, the third requires some elaboration. Yet even the first two pose challenges to political scientists that are often undervalued and hence require a little discussion.

TEACHING. It is normally presumed that, having earned a PhD, political scientists should for that reason know how to communicate to students the knowledge they have so laboriously accumulated. As we all know this is far from true. All subjects present distinctive difficulties, and so does political science. I will here highlight those that I have personally found more challenging (and to which – I must confess – I am not yet sure to

⁷ There is nothing scientific in the following statement, but my impression is that a “generation of scholars” appears every 10 or so years.

have found a satisfactory answer). The first challenge connected with teaching regards being able to fine-tune the message to the audience. We sometimes take for granted that in our classrooms sit students eager to learn about our subject and who share our same enthusiasm for it. This is often not the case. Students today often expect to acquire through higher education immediately marketable skills that they can deploy in an ever more competitive labor market. What specific skills does political science develop in students that can be immediately put to use out there? More simply, how can we arouse the interest of our students in the intricacies of political science, that require a mix of formal knowledge and passion for the unfolding of day-to-day events? Political scientists obviously find politics exceedingly exciting and cultivate a nerdy interest in the minutest details of electoral systems, policy-making processes and institutional architectures, but they are sometimes surprisingly inept at sharing this interest with their students or at making them see how these abilities are assets that can be showcased to land good jobs. The rising field of (political) communication is one of the sub-fields of political science that promises to deliver such skills, and Italian political scientists need to be ready to cultivate this field which is increasingly occupied by scholars coming from other disciplines.

The second challenge stems from the fact that, while some of the main theories that characterize the study of politics remain fairly stable in time, the material to which they get applied constantly changes: no two elections, no two policy decisions, no two processes of democratization are the same. Rarely is the extent to which teaching politics implies a constant effort at updating one's knowledge fully appreciated. Nothing ages more rapidly than an electoral result (particularly in Italy)! Political scientists may appear to simply describe the latest electoral result or the last reconfiguration in the party system, not too differently from other political commentators, and they must be better able to defend the scientificity of their profession and to communicate better the value added of their discipline.

To make things worse, and this is the third challenge, Italian political scientists, like most Italian academics, are not required to learn how to teach (a certificate in education is not among the requirements for teaching at university level in Italy) and are not required to adapt their teaching methods to evolving technologies. This has become painfully evident during the Covid-19 pandemic, when most of us taught online as we would have taught in class, by delivering more or less well-crafted lectures that we hope were sufficiently clear and held the interest of the students. But even in normal times, the average lecturer hardly feels the need to innovate on his/her teaching technique other than perhaps sharing a picture or two or projecting a short video to bring a particular event to life. Trying to innovate in one's teaching techniques is a difficult, time-consuming and uncertain enterprise that would greatly benefit if professional training sessions were offered to university lecturers as part of their continuing education. The kind of teaching assessment that is performed in Italy hardly has an impact on the tools used by political scientists in their (virtual) classrooms and no specific reward (or penalty) is associated with their effort (or lack thereof) to innovate. What is still mostly measured in Italy is simply the number of hours taught and a generic satisfaction on the part of the students, but hardly the in-depth look into teaching methods that is

performed elsewhere (e.g., the English Teaching Excellence Framework, which, however, is still carried out on a voluntary basis).

RESEARCH. We all know that future academics are supposed to carry out research, which normally means more than just reading books and crafting nifty arguments. Research in political science is mostly empirical and requires holding interviews, running surveys, collecting and analyzing documents, elaborating existing statistics, reconstructing policy processes, observing or participating in decision-making events, and much more. These activities are time-consuming and costly, and this is why political scientists (like other social scientists) spend long hours drafting research projects that, if funded, allow them to carry out research and bring money and notoriety to their universities, in turn allowing the latter to climb some notches in the international rankings. Having won a competitive bid for research funds from some prestigious funding agency – particularly in the capacity of “principal investigator” (PI) – is now one of the criteria that contribute to defining the profile of an established political scientist. Younger scholars are learning that research matters and that it matters even more than teaching. It is becoming almost easier for younger scholars to achieve this milestone (winning a competitive bid as PI) than it is for older ones, not least because the funds dedicated to young scholars have lately appropriately multiplied. The amount of funds raised by a political scientist is increasingly becoming one of the indicators according to which scholars are assessed by university departments. Abroad, political scientists are hard pressed to bring a certain amount of funds to their university: indeed, some university positions give their occupants only a modest fixed salary, the understanding being that the complement to a standard university salary should be made up by funds won by the scholar in competitive bids. The piece-rate pay system is spreading quickly and, once again, I would not be surprised if it were to spread also to Italian academia.

CONTRIBUTION TO SOCIETY. The third mission of universities consists in giving back to society by disseminating widely the knowledge produced and by making sure that the research activities carried out therein are socially useful. This kind of activity is also useful in alerting the rest of the world that political science has indeed something valuable to offer and improving its (traditionally still low) standing among the social sciences. This has introduced a whole new aspect in the academic profession. In addition to being good teachers and successful researchers, academics must now contribute to society by disseminating relevant knowledge that has immediate practical applications.

In itself, this quest has merits, as it forces academics to think hard about the social relevance of their research topics and to be able to present their findings in a manner accessible to the wider public. These goals, in themselves sacrosanct, have, however, the potential of diverting the attention of scholars from scientifically worthwhile (but in themselves dull) enterprises to topics that are more easily presented as useful and resonate more with the wider public. According to a recent study, academics, particularly those of the STEM disciplines, don't mind sharing their results; what is rather lacking is a sufficiently robust demand from society which has lately increased as a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic (Regini, 2021: 22; Perulli et al, 2018). Basic research, which does not immediately lead to any applicable result but has the potential of opening up important avenues of study, may be discouraged. Typically, methodological research – that is research that aims at refining existing methods and developing new ones – is

extremely difficult to communicate to the wider public and may be discouraged, while communication studies or opinion pools lend themselves more easily to being publicized to the wider public.⁸ Political science may rather run the opposite risk: in an attempt to simplify the message and reach the wider public, political scientists may end up being mixed up with others who also “talk about politics” (and for that reason are called *politologi*, literally “those who talk about politics”), such as journalists or mass-media experts. These, although often more informed about current events and in certain cases also very knowledgeable with regard to the political scientific literature, on average use commonsensical arguments in their comments rather than the theories, models and knowledge developed by political science. The real danger here is to perpetuate a certain image of political scientists as not real “scientists”, but just as people who talk about things political.

5. The lingering challenges: governance, administration and service to the community

The changes in the composition and quality of Italian political scientists described above are certainly very promising but are also fraught with dangers for the continuing growth and consolidation of the discipline. Let us summarize the achievements. First of all, it is by now taken for granted that Italian political scientists should have earned a PhD in political science or in a cognate social science with a clear specialization in the study of politics (a PhD in Political Science is preferable). They should know the political science literature, broadly refer to its theoretical and analytical approaches, and use its methodological arsenal. They should have been trained to write, present and discuss their scientific works at national and international conferences and to disseminate their findings and reflections through national and international quality journals. They should demonstrate a certain continuity in the production of scientific works, slowing down possibly only during more intensive phases of data collection or in preparation of more complex scholarly products such as book manuscripts. They should command a number of methods, whether quantitative or qualitative, and be aware of the pros and cons of using the ones and the others. Provided they clear all these requirements and show a pertinent record, with the important proviso that a sufficient number of positions in political science (and correlated funds) are available, they can legitimately aim at a steady progression of their careers. All good, then?

In reality there are dangers inherent in this otherwise commendable mainstreaming of the profession that are worthy of mention. A career in political science, like that in many other disciplines in Italy, requires also being available to carry out a number of activities that objectively distract from the three missions described above and that can be indicated as participating in the governance of university departments, contributing to the administration that makes the above three missions possible, and offering a service to the community (such as reviewing journal articles and other types of submissions, serving on the board of scientific journals, participating in evaluation committees, serving on the executive committees of scientific associations, etc.). Young scholars, fresh

⁸ For a fuller assessment of the potentials and constraints of the third mission of universities, see Compagnucci and Spigarelli (2020).

out of a PhD and perhaps enjoying the freedom afforded by a research grant, rightly worry about taking the first steps of their careers thinking that landing a position in a university department is the hardest part. In their minds, the uncertainties connected to their situation obviously outweigh the freedom of being able to shape one's research agenda and dedicate oneself full-time to studying, doing research and writing. Having interiorized the well-known injunction "publish or perish", this is what they single-mindedly pursue. Little do they know that those precarious years with little money and too much freedom may be the best of their lives! Once they finally land a job in academia and clear the first hurdle to a stable position – in the current Italian promotion system, when they become associate professors – their freedom and time begin to evaporate, and they are required to perform some of the many accessory activities (described above) that allow the system to function.

Unfortunately, some scholars never quite make the psychological transition and try to retain the best of both worlds: stability and freedom. This leads to situations in which departments are starved of people who are willing to help run them efficiently; evaluation committees (think of the various *concorsi*, but also of the VQR and the ASN) are deprived of brilliant scholars who would rightfully contribute to keeping up the standards of the profession; scholarly journals do not find competent editors who can secure a stream of high-level scientific publications; and disciplinary associations and other governance structures cannot find worthy candidates to fill their executive positions. "Service to the community" in various capacities is one of the hallmarks of an established scholar just as brilliant teaching, innovative research and captivating posts are. Many colleagues eventually understand the importance of also carrying out these activities but, particularly among those who have experienced a long period of precariousness or who have begun their careers abroad, a certain reluctance in sharing the burdens of a system that they do not yet feel is their own can be noted.

6. Conclusions

Italian political scientists have made momentous progress on many fronts, but particularly by upgrading upper tertiary education, mainstreaming career development and intensifying their presence in international scientific circles. A greater international mobility of Italian scholars studying and working abroad and, vice versa, foreign scholars studying and working in Italy can also be observed. These changes have been accompanied by a certain differentiation between (variously denominated) political science departments now trying to acquire a particular specialization and international standing in attractive research areas or in specific methodological approaches. A certain attempt at innovation and hybridization of political science with other social sciences is also observable, though perhaps not to the extent that seems to be required by the changing needs of current societies. More could be done in several areas: from the establishment of applied PhD programs in collaboration with private firms and public agencies to the constant upgrading of teaching and disseminating techniques through more investment in continuing education and life-long learning arrangements.

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