

A contribution to [THE PROFESSION] series

Contemporary Italian Politics: Italy from abroad

An interview with James Newell

Introduction

James Newell is an adjunct professor at the University of Urbino Carlo Bo and former Professor of Politics at the University of Salford, UK. His recent books include, *Silvio Berlusconi: A Study in Failure* (2019), *Corruption in Contemporary Politics a New Travel Guide* (2019) (both with Manchester University Press), *Europe and the Left: Resisting the Populist Tide* (ed. Palgrave, 2020), *Italy's Contemporary Politics* (Routledge, 2020). With Maurizio Carbone, he is co-founder of the quarterly journal, *Contemporary Italian Politics*.

The following interview was conducted by the editor of *Italian Political Science*, **Daniela Sicurelli**, and edited by the interviewee.

Daniela Sicurelli [DS]:

Can you summarise the history of *Contemporary Italian Politics*?

James Newell [JN] *Contemporary Italian Politics* began life in 2009 as the twice-yearly *Bulletin of Italian Politics*, which I co-founded with Maurizio Carbone. Hosted on the web site of the University of Glasgow, the *Bulletin* was an open-access publication whose aim was to provide a forum for discussion of recent developments in Italian politics and of their domestic and international implications. However, the journal's origins actually go back to 2002 and the founding of the UK Political Studies Association's (PSA's) Italian Politics Specialist Group (IPSG) with which it has always been in some way associated. PSA specialist groups, supported and funded by the Association, are designed to bring together academics with research and teaching interests in specific areas of politics, in order to enhance the quality of activities within the given field by providing opportunities for group members to network, organise conferences and carry out joint publication projects. The aim in establishing the IPSG was therefore to create a vehicle for the further development of the study of Italian politics in the UK. As such, the Group soon became highly successful – in terms of the number of members it was able to recruit; its sponsorship of conferences, and of panels at the Association's annual meetings; the publication activities of its members; its ability to bring to the UK internationally known Italian political scientists and so on (so much so that in 2017 the Group was awarded the PSA's "Specialist Group of the Year" prize) – and so the launch of the *Bulletin of Italian Politics* was designed to build on that success.

Contemporary Italian Politics was the name assumed by the *Bulletin* after Taylor and Francis agreed to take over its production in 2013 when it became a thrice-yearly publication. The change of name was perceived as necessary in order the more accurately to reflect the journal's aims. "*Bulletin*" had been chosen in order to emphasise our concern to fill a gap by providing a forum especially for articles analysing the most *recent* events bearing in mind both the rapidity of change in Italian politics at the time and the difficulties faced by conventional academic journals, with their long lead-in times, in doing this. Its disadvantage was that it risked giving the impression that the journal was a newspaper. *Contemporary Italian Politics* was therefore chosen in order *both* to emphasise the current relevance of the topics its articles cover *and* to remove any doubts about the academic rigour and analytic incisiveness we were aiming for.

The aims and scope of the journal meant that it had much in common with the well-known annual, *Politica in Italia* (Pit), published by il Mulino under the auspices of the Istituto Carlo Cattaneo in collaboration with the Johns Hopkins University SAIS Europe. As most readers of IPS will be aware, Pit began life in 1986, bringing together Italian and foreign scholars to provide description and analysis of the most significant events and developments of the year just passed. Like the journal, it seeks to bring a knowledge of Italian politics to a wide audience both in and beyond academia. Like the journal, it seeks to respond to the ethical imperative of inclusivity in the sense of knowledge production that is accessible, rather than being the preserve of those with intellectual resources out of the reach of the many. Like the journal, it provides a service both to contemporary historians (as volumes accumulate, allowing researchers to trace back developments and changes) and political scientists (looking for the empirical material that will enable them to include the Italian case in comparative studies). It therefore seemed fitting that the tenth anniversary of the journal should be marked by an increase in the number of issues from three to four per year to enable the publication to host the English-language edition of Pit, which in 2021 made its fourth appearance as an issue of journal, guest-edited by Arianna Giovannini and Lorenzo Mosca.

DS: Which theoretical approaches/methods are represented in the articles published by the journal?

JN: The scope and the remit of the journal – to provide rigorous analysis of contemporary events and trends in Italian politics – mean that it operates on the boundary between contemporary history and political science and that other disciplines, such as sociology and international relations, are also relevant to its concerns. Consequently, as one would expect, the theoretical approaches and research methods represented vary considerably. Both interpretive and positivist research paradigms are reflected in the published material as are cross-sectional and longitudinal studies, inductive and deductive approaches.

Since it began life in 2009, the journal has published a total of 254 articles (besides book reviews and, in its early days, dialogues, roundtables, news and events). Of these 254, about 60% are based on quantitative data with about 50%

using the data for exploratory and about 10% for confirmatory analysis. The remainder of the articles are based on the qualitative analysis of text and/or interview transcripts.

DS: How does Italian scholarship figure in the authorship of the journal (in terms of coverage, diversity, competitiveness, etc.)?

JN: The vast majority – meaning over 90% – of authors submitting articles to the journal are mother-tongue speakers of Italian, with over 90% of these being based at an institution located in Italy and corresponding proportions for the articles actually published. This means that with rare exceptions, most of the material is produced by authors whose first language is not English – with the result that in many cases the editors have to take considerable care, once articles have survived the refereeing process and been accepted for publication, to carry out the “polishing” necessary to bring them up to a publishable standard from a linguistic point of view. It is the policy of the journal not to release text for publication until it meets the standards one would reasonably expect of a mother-tongue speaker of English.

DS: How, in your opinion, does the logic of career progression in the Italian academia affect the decision of what to publish and where?

JN: I believe that the logic of career progression affects the decision of what to publish and where in the same way in the Italian as it does in other systems, although I am nonplussed by it. As I understand it, progression mostly depends on performance in terms of a number of publication and citation metrics. Consequently, like their counterparts elsewhere, Italian academics do want to publish in English; they don't want to publish book chapters and they don't want to publish in journals that are not in “*fascia A*”. If we do not tackle language loss, more than half of all of the world's languages will become extinct in the next 100 years. One of the most influential works ever produced in political science is a book chapter (namely, Kirchheimer's chapter on the “catch-all” party). Galileo Galilei would have failed to publish his work in a “*fascia A*” journal had the category existed at the time. My point is that I am sorry that, as a profession, we seem unwilling to resist performance measurement and accountability for what we do. First, I think that it is inappropriate to hold academics accountable, for the same reason that it is inappropriate to make judges publicly accountable for their sentencing decisions. Second, it is difficult to see on what basis the more “significant” and “original” work deemed to score highly in research assessment exercises could be produced at all in the absence of the underlying routine, empirical research of other scholars on which it inevitably relies. In short, research is ultimately a collective endeavour to which everyone can and does contribute. Finally, assessment regimes underpin the marketization of higher education, the commodification of academic labour and the hegemony of the neo-liberal paradigm, so placing it beyond criticism. Yet the *sine qua non* of the academic enterprise is that *nothing* be placed beyond potential criticism and intellectual scrutiny.

DS: *Contemporary Italian Politics* ranks in the first quartile of Scimago (for both Political Science & International Relations and Political Science and Sociology). How do you think this kind of ranking affects the authorship and readership of the journal?

JN: Now I am compelled to take a position that clashes in many ways with what I have just argued since at a guess I would say that the journal's ranking means that it attracts more submissions than it would do were its ranking lower, and that this in turn has a positive impact both on the quality of the articles published and on reader numbers. However, as you might expect me say, I like to think that we might have succeeded in generating such a virtuous circle in any event, had journal "league tables" not existed.

DS: To conclude, from your viewpoint, what are the main ingredients to a success story such as that of *Contemporary Italian Politics*?

JN: I think, first, that timing has been significant. The journal was launched at the end of a twenty-five year period that had seen an explosion of interest in Italian politics beyond its frontiers as attested to by the growing number of English-language books, both academic and popular, focussing on the area or some aspect of it. Thus, in the mid-1980s there was (leaving aside very specifically-focussed research monographs) really only one general English-language text that teachers of Italian politics at university level could call upon (Frederic Spotts' and Theodor Wieser's, *Italy, a difficult democracy*, Cambridge University Press, 1986). The next quarter century then saw the appearance of roughly one new Italian politics book every eighteen months.

Reasons for the expansion in interest were not hard to find and included growing European integration and therefore the increasing relevance of its member countries for political developments within other EU-member states (Italy then being among the four largest and now, with Brexit, among the three largest); the considerable expansion in the teaching of politics in higher education thanks to the expansion in university-student numbers in general; the new emphasis placed in American universities on the European Union and its Member States; the dramatic social changes associated with globalisation such as the growth in air travel and tourism, as well as the explosion of information available thanks to development of the Internet, and so on.

If many of these changes applied to areas of politics other than the Italian case, then interest here was particularly sparked by the dramatic and profound changes that were set in motion by the great "Bribe City" corruption scandal and the other upheavals of the early 1990s and by the emergence and growth of Silvio Berlusconi, whose activities, political success and dominance of the political scene were unprecedented, not just in Italy but in Europe in general if not more broadly. Consequently, from being widely viewed as a country of "stable instability" – one where (for all that its political arrangements were fragile, inefficient and unpopular) the Christian Democrats were always in power and nothing important ever really changed – from the early 1990s the situation was one of almost "permanent revolution". Consequently, the future always appeared to be

completely open, with developments even in the near future incredibly hard to predict. And of course this fluidity, this sense of uncertainty, not to say anxiety, about the future has continued down to the present and extended well beyond the frontiers of Italy to become the *leitmotif* of early twenty-first century politics generally. If this has deprived Italy of much of its former distinctiveness, then by highlighting growing global interdependence it has helped to maintain interest in the country's politics from abroad at its former high level.

Against this background, I think that when we launched the journal we successfully identified a real gap in the market. That is to say, there is a need for the journal because the space which articles focussing on contemporary Italian politics can find in the two main, English-language journals focussing on Italy – the *Journal of Modern Italian Studies (JMIS)* and *Modern Italy (MI)* – is at least to some extent limited by the remit of these publications. Of course, articles on current Italian politics *do* find a home here, but the publications also have to give space to a much wider range of concerns which, in the case of the *JMIS* include “the political, economic, cultural, and social history of modern Italy from 1700 to the present”,¹ in the case of *MI*, “the history, politics and social, economic and cultural life of Italy and the Italian peoples from the eighteenth century to the present”.²

Finally, I think that the journal owes its success to the large quantity of high-quality material written by academics who are mother-tongue speakers of Italian who would otherwise publish their work in an Italian-language journal but who seek a wider audience by publishing in English. As already implied, the launch of the journal coincided with a considerable and growing demand among non-English speaking political scientists to see their work published in English owing to the growing internationalisation of political science and the growing impact of research assessment exercises, university league tables, measures of “impact” and so forth – giving publication in the English language definite and considerable advantages to authors. And of course it also coincided with the dramatic expansion of politics as a discipline in general that had taken place in Italian universities in the four decades leading up to its emergence.

We live in a world in which the public sphere has become internationalised: in which issues on the political agenda in any one part of the world have a high profile at least in part because of their echoes and their relevance for similar issues in other parts. An example of such an issue being debated in Italy at the present moment is the *proposta di legge Zan*, in public discussion of which the positions being taken on similar issues by Viktor Orbán in Hungary have featured highly as have the implications of failure to pass the proposal for Italy's record on the issue in comparison with that of other European countries. Another is Euro2020 and which teams, including Italy, are or are not taking the knee and why. Yet a third is the September 2020 referendum on the reduction in the number of parliamentarians which, as I wrote in a recent editorial for the journal, was in many respects Italy's answer to the UK's June 2016 Brexit

¹ See: <https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?show=aimsScope&journalCode=rmis20>.

² Accessible online at: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/modern-italy>.

referendum. It may seem banal to say that events in any one part of the world cannot be fully understood without at least some knowledge of what is going on in the other parts, but it does mean that now more than ever there is a small but important part for the journal to play in dissemination of this knowledge.

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