

TRIBUTE

## Mario Caciagli (1938-2024)

### A Political Scientist Between Political Science and History

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**M**ario Caciagli passed away in May 2024. For over sixty years, beginning in the early 1960s and continuing up to his final moments, he made a remarkable impact on the field of social sciences. His distinctive approach to comparative and historical political science set him apart as a significant contributor to our discipline.

Caciagli had an intense *vita activa*: he was deeply involved in organizing cultural activities through various institutional roles, and as a university professor, researcher, and scholar he dedicated himself to exploring political and social phenomena.

His scholarly contributions are reflected in an extensive bibliography spanning four languages in addition to Italian. As a university professor, he is fondly remembered for his exceptional ability to engage students in meaningful discussions, explanations, and interpretations of social and political phenomena. He deeply mastered the art of writing, dedicating himself to making complex ideas and phenomena accessible to all. Through his teaching, he imparted invaluable writing skills to countless students and mentees, emphasizing the importance of using words thoughtfully, elegantly, and thriftily. His legacy continues to inspire those who had the privilege of learning from him, leaving an indelible mark on the academic community.

The following pages will highlight the pivotal aspects of Mario Caciagli's intellectual journey and the major contributions his works made to the field of Political Science.

### Empirical Comparative Politics: Between Electoral Studies and Political Culture

Through his research and theoretical reflections, Caciagli significantly contributed to defining historical political science, a method he predominantly utilized in studying local politics and political culture. He began his academic journey with robust historical investigations. His *tesi di laurea* was in Contemporary History, supervised by Giovanni Spadolini, and focused on *La Martinella*, a socialist periodical from Colle Val d'Elsa

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(Siena). Following this, he furthered his expertise as a research fellow at the Italian Historical Institute in Naples.

Caciagli dedicated his professional life to political science, yet he firmly believed that history always plays a crucial role in shaping political events and behaviors. He was convinced that it is impossible to engage in political science, or to analyze political and social phenomena more broadly, without a deep awareness of their historical context.

His theoretical contemplation and empirical research primarily focused on political cultures. Throughout his writings, he emphasized that the term "political culture" does not inherently carry a positive connotation. It does not simply equate to civic culture, namely a culture based on the respect for rules and conscious democratic conduct. Rather political culture should be understood as a neutral term that can describe a wide range of sometimes conflicting phenomena in the social sciences. Caciagli expanded the understanding of political culture beyond the psychological aspect emphasized in Gabriel Almond's influential studies from the 1950s. He clarified that political culture is not solely based on individual opinions or attitudes. Instead, it is rooted in concepts, values, symbols, norms, rituals, and shared collective myths. Political culture is a multifaceted blend that emerges within a specific historical framework, interwoven with and shaped by power dynamics and economic structures. It is a fluid and evolving phenomenon that transforms over time. Therefore - Caciagli reminded us - there is no single political culture but rather multiple political cultures: those of the youth, women, immigrants, the bourgeoisie and proletariat, Catholics, Muslims, fascists, and communists. There are also the political cultures of national states and different cultures within nation-states, which can be defined as territorial subcultures (among others, Caciagli 2017; 2004; 1988a). Indeed, Italians have had and continue to have diverse and opposing political cultures, and Caciagli dedicated a significant portion of his research and publications to these characterizing subcultures. He applied comparative analysis to explain the differing electoral behaviors in various subcultural areas and the different organizational evolutions of parties. He wrote extensively about the twentieth-century epic of the red regions in Europe, explaining, through historical electoral comparison, the similarities and differences among these areas in Germany, Austria, and France (Caciagli 2006), and comparing them with the evolution and decline of the last red strongholds in Italy.

He also explored comprehensively the concept of clientelism, examining it not only in Italy but also as a widespread political phenomenon globally (Caciagli, 1977; 2009). His work includes an insightful analysis of the diminishing influence of the white subculture in Veneto (1988b), and the evolution of political subcultures during the Second Republic in Italy (Caciagli, 2010). Notably, his research on the red political subculture in Tuscany was thorough and extended over several years. His dedicated book on this subject, regarded as comprehensive in many respects (Caciagli, 2017), offers an in-depth look at the political culture of communists. This work is organized into four distinct phases over two decades, with a particular focus on the Medio Valdarno Inferiore region in central Tuscany. This study provides a valuable framework for understanding the broader ideological shifts within the Italian electorate from the post-war era to the present day.

Mario Caciagli's most recent publication (2022) brings together a rich selection of writings that span over fifty years, focusing on the Valdelsa region. His deep-seated commitment to this area, which he returned to for research repeatedly, reflects both his belief in the idea that "on revient toujours à ses premiers amours" (one always returns to one's first loves) and his desire to highlight the importance of delving into a region's historical processes to better understand contemporary issues. By carefully examining this specific territory, local political research allows for the collection of primary empirical data, enabling a thorough analysis of events. This approach, while more focused in scope, provides a solid foundation for the broader generalizations that are central to social and political science: Sacrificing some breadth in favor of gaining deeper insights.

Caciagli was deeply committed to interdisciplinary scholarship, seamlessly weaving together with political science, diverse fields such as history, electoral geography, sociology, and anthropology. This approach did not dilute his analysis or make it fragmented or ambiguous; rather, it enriched his work, making it more thorough, comprehensive, and insightful. By ensuring that each element interrelated and supported the others, he maintained a cohesive and comprehensive understanding. This exemplifies what it means to truly embrace an interdisciplinary approach, where each discipline enhances and deepens the insights provided by the others.

## **Internationalization: Embracing Languages and Cultures**

On a scientific level, Caciagli's legacy is profoundly marked by his comparative, integrated, and in-depth approach. However, his broader academic impact is equally significant and deserves recognition: his unwavering dedication to the internationalization of research. This was particularly noteworthy in an era when, once again, such practices were far from commonplace. The idea of an international perspective, research networks, and collaborations with colleagues abroad was not yet standard; these concepts were still emerging and not widely adopted in academic circles.

Mario Caciagli didn't just champion these ideas in theory; he embodied them. His own work took him across Europe—spanning Spain, Germany, and France—reflecting his comparative outlook and boundless scientific curiosity. Moreover, he also urged young scholars to embrace international opportunities. This guidance was forward-thinking, anticipating that, within a few decades, such global connections would become vital for any successful academic career.

At the University of Florence, after having served as a professor at both the University of Catania in the South and the University of Padua in the North of Italy, he made a significant impact by championing the European Erasmus Program from its inception in 1987, and then coordinating it for nearly a decade. Through this dedicated effort, he greatly expanded the scientific, intellectual, and linguistic horizons of hundreds of political science students, as well as those of numerous young faculty members.

Caciagli was fluent in three foreign languages, in addition to (and better than) English. Before English became the dominant global lingua franca and the primary language in our field, his linguistic skills—which by him meant a comprehensive cultural knowledge gained through collaborations, research stays, networks and fieldwork—enabled him to work effortlessly across many European countries and beyond. He was not only able to write in these languages but also read newspapers, primary sources, and

conduct interviews. Such deep cultural and linguistic knowledge - such an essential requirement for academic researchers - was rare among his peers of his generation. Through his example, Mario Caciagli showed many young scholars and future generations a richer form of internationalization, which goes beyond merely knowing a (single?) foreign language. A path that, while certainly more complex, is intellectually much more stimulating and rewarding.

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