PART III

Politics
Thinking about Italian politics in terms of “place” is to emphasize how the geographies of everyday life figure in how political movements arise in some places but not others, parties put down roots better in some places than elsewhere, and local attachments arise that animate political behavior to the extent that liberating those places from the rest of the country becomes the object of political action. The two dominant genres of writing about Italian politics are those that focus on the “making” of Italy as a nation and those that see it as divided/united essentially by national social classes and a powerful left/right political division that pervades the country whatever the current political regime or system of parties happens to be. Most commentators also acknowledge that the country has had longstanding geographical differences economically, socially, and politically. But both dominant genres implicitly view these as residual: destined to fade in significance as national unity overcomes regional and local identities or as nationwide class divisions trump local and regional affiliations and interests.

This chapter refuses to partake of these particular narratives. This does not mean that I would deny the existence of an Italian national project or the reality of social classes organizing nationally. It is that these only take on meaning for people and thus affect who they are and how they act in terms of the practical routines and pathways of everyday life. It is important to emphasize, however, that this does not entail a vision of Italy in which geographical differences informing present-day politics are simply inheritances from the dim and distant past. I prefer to provide an account of Italian politics that takes geographical divisions seriously as the result not of primordial identities or fixed interests residing in different places, as most approaches to the geography of Italian politics have tended to do, but as emergent features of the sociality of life as lived by people across Italy, representing the blending together in different places of workplace, religious, residential, and demographic differences that inform people’s life experiences and condition their political attitudes and behavior.

The chapter begins with a brief overview of why place matters to politics irrespective of country but with particular attention to Italy. This challenges both the nationalist and the individualist premises upon which much political analysis tends to rely: that the sole context in which individuals operate is that of their respective nation states. I then provide a selective survey of how geographical differences in social and political behavior across Italy have been considered by students of Italian politics. A third section provides an empirical analysis of Italian electoral politics covering both the so-called First Republic or party system from 1948 to 1992 and then,
in somewhat more detail, the recent period from 1994 to 2008. I then turn to one of the most interesting phenomena of recent Italian politics: the rise of the Northern League as a political party invested in representing a particular region of Italy. This is a politics of place more than just a politics arising in places. Finally, I address the issue of whether centralized command over national communications networks and the spread of new technologies (such as the so-called social media) portend the declining significance of place, particularly as the parties that have lain at the center of Italian politics lose their role as transmission belts for popular demands and citizens become consumers of messages to which they supposedly respond in lockstep rather than as active social participants in political life.

**Place and politics**

A commonplace of social psychology is that people’s attitudes are shaped by where they are. Situational factors enter into interpersonal interactions, the attribution of trust and knowledge, judgments about ethics, and consumption decisions. From this viewpoint, there is no such thing as discrete individuals. The boundaries of the “me” are fluid. As a result, decisions, choices, and actions are all inspired by links with others. Terms such as “social networks” and “the social logic of action” have been coined to describe these interdependencies. “Network effects” are well established: people can and often do change preferences simply on the basis of what others say and do. Face-to-face relationships are absolutely central to the development of selves. From parental and household influences to friendship and acquaintanceship circles, people are social beings whose lives and behavior circulate around well-worn paths and routines. These are anchored to the sites in which social situations are located. Numerous studies have shown that the social contexts in which people develop their attitudes are spatially defined (e.g. Zuckerman, 2005). The heuristics or rules of thumb that we come to rely on to make decisions are the result of social interaction conditioned by where we work, play, worship, and learn. This does not mean that everyone in a given place agrees on everything. Far from it: rather, it is from the experience of anchored social networks that emanate whatever attitudes people exhibit. But different people have different experiences that reflect their command over resources, their relative social power, and restrictions on the range of their sites of social interaction. Hence, though some common orientations can be expected, there is absolutely no expectation of complete uniformity in attitudes.

It is the social spaces arising in different places, therefore, that are most at stake in defining how political attitudes and behavior arise and change. But the relative presence of different types of sites or locales for interaction ultimately conditions how interpersonal and communal influences really operate. The “background geography” of places underpins the social spaces of interaction (e.g. Newburger et al., 2011; Sampson, 2012). Some places have big factories, others do not; some places have many peasants, others do not; some places are dominated by agribusiness, others are not; some places have longstanding cultural and recreation activities tied to churches, others do not; some places are heavily urbanized, others are not; some places are well tied into transportation and communication networks, others are not; some places have been affected by natural calamities, others have not; some places have very specialized economies (and equally narrow elites), others do not; some places are magnets for immigrants, others are not; and so on. There are systematic correlations between these different types of place and the sorts of political attitudes and behavior that they encourage (Agnew, 1987).

Places, the settings for sites of social interaction, structure the ways in which political attitudes and organization develop. In Italy, a number of obvious historic geographical features lie behind the more dynamic churning of the economy and society to produce the basic template of
geographical differences. These would include, for example, the long-established political division of the peninsula before final unification in one state only in 1870, the settlement system with its lack of a single dominant city and its orientation fundamentally affected by the long coastline and long mountainous spine of the Apennines, the more successful history of large-scale industrialization in the country’s northwest, the diffuse urbanization that has characterized large parts of central and northeastern Italy since the 1970s, notwithstanding major efforts at redistributing industry and supplementing incomes, the lag of most southern regions behind the North in terms of economic growth, and the peculiar geography of Catholic Italy, with practice reflecting the prior political divisions of the peninsula and attendant views of the Church as much as the relative pace of secularization (e.g. Coppola, 1997; Cartocci, 2011; Cozzo, 2011). Other countries have their own, if very distinctive, repertoires of such differences. In that regard, Italy is by no means unique.

This way of thinking about politics is by no means new, if the ideas of social psychology that inform it could sound unfamiliar to many current students of politics. Indeed, until the 1950s in the United States and elsewhere, the social logic and social geography of politics was everywhere predominant. Political sociology retained an emphasis on “territorial” or geographical cleavages and the impact of “neighborhood effects” on voting behavior for even longer. Italian Fascism, for example, was widely understood as a movement that had its roots in the towns of the Po Valley and among the middle classes of areas with a powerful socialist presence. The US South was the dominion of the Democratic Party until the 1960s, when the passage of the federal Civil Rights Act of 1964 led many southern whites to turn against the party whose President, Lyndon Johnson, introduced the legislation. Two trends in social science since the 1960s have obscured this heritage of geographical thinking about politics and made writing about “place and politics” appear more novel or exotic than is actually the case. The first was the borrowing from microeconomics, arguably the most “scientific” of the social sciences in terms of its reliance on a nineteenth-century model of physics, of an ontology of action focused on autonomous individual actors engaged in rational calculation about political goals (often called “methodological individualism”). From this viewpoint, social environments are solely sources of informational and material constraints, not the identities, interests, and preferences associated with the individuals themselves. Recently, however, the more sociological view has undergone something of a revival, suggesting, for example, that prejudices as much as reasons underpin motivations and that social influences cannot be reduced to the effects of separate individuals simply bumping up against one another (Massey, 2012).

The second was the presumed victory of the nation state as the sole locus of political activity. This has had two implications. One is the focus on national electoral politics as a sort of sporting event or horse race in which national-level majorities are all that is of much interest. The actual “making” of such majorities might involve political operatives with detailed local knowledge but academic students of politics need to know only how to predict the overall outcome, not how to explain how it comes about. The other is to collect national-level survey data that gives you the traits and opinions of individual voters divorced from any concern about social context other than the national. The presumption is that as long as you sample sufficiently across demographic characteristics (age, sex, race, ethnicity, class, etc.), you can know enough to predict results. Yet, increasingly not only local and regional differences but also influences emanating from beyond national borders make the presumption of national containment of political determinants open to doubt (Veltri, 2010). But the combination of methodological individualism and “methodological nationalism” has undoubtedly become the “common sense” of political studies in Italy as elsewhere.
Whether it represents “good sense” is another question entirely. The increased complexity of political offerings, rising electoral abstentionism, and the emergence of place-specific political movements have made it less and less useful in its own terms. The paradigm is in trouble. In the words of Ilvo Diamanti (2012a: 103), after offering a similar diagnosis to mine:

It is therefore difficult to understand what is happening in politics without taking account of the everyday life, of the common sense of the territory; without profoundly exploring the places where the parties, the institutions, and democracy find the roots to their legitimation and their consensus.

Fixing regions

“Geography” has figured more centrally in a number of approaches to Italian politics. But in each, geography is subordinated to some other imperative, be it economic, cultural, or political. Three distinctive conceptions can be distinguished. The first, predominant among scholars of elections in the 1960s and still important in reporting election results, is that of voting regions and the association between some of these and so-called regional subcultures. The classic division of Italy is into four regions, the industrial Northwest, the “traditionally” white or Catholic Northeast, the “traditionally” red or socialist Center, and the economically underdeveloped South. These electoral regions came into existence after World War II and are seen as reflecting structural differences, sometimes entirely economic and sometimes pre-eminently cultural, between discrete areas. If the Northwest and the South are seen as based on the relative success of mass politics because of the relative presence of the organized working class in the former and its absence in the latter, the Northeast and the Center represent deep-seated cultural traditions based on a complex of historical differences such as differences in rural land tenure, family types, attitudes towards the Church hierarchy, and the differential colonization of the regions by political movements such as Christian Democracy and Socialism before Fascism.

The second approach has a much more long-term understanding of regional difference. In this case the emphasis is on how in the distant past, when Italy was divided politically into a variety of states, very different political cultures developed and ever since have conditioned the practice of politics in the places that, though now parts of a unified Italy, still betray their older characteristics. Associated most closely with the research project of Robert Putnam (1993), this approach does have much deeper roots in the cultural sociology that identifies southern Italy, in particular, with such ideas as “amoral familism,” a cultural syndrome in which immediate family ties trump any sort of wider civic culture or collective action, and an instrumental as opposed to consummatory attitude towards national citizenship. From this perspective, contemporary political differences such as extent of identification with parties as vehicles for distinctive ideologies, rates of political participation, and relative volatility in votes for all parties across elections are put down to longstanding geographical differences in the degree of civic culture and/or cultural capital present in a particular place.

A final approach focuses much more on the regional pattern of returns to political incentives as these have evolved over time. Thus, voting in the South has come to reflect the dependence of the region on policy initiatives coming from Rome, redistributive politics, and the relatively high level of government employment in the region. This, along with the historical incidence in some parts of the South of alliances between some parties and criminal organizations, has encouraged high levels of so-called exchange or quid pro quo voting. Voting in the main metropolitan areas and the Northwest, however, fits more closely with the model of so-called opinion voting in which people respond to party programs as rational individual voters. Finally,
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in some regions so-called identity voting tends to prevail. This is the result both of well-entrenched parties providing locally desired services (that the central government fails to provide) and of the attachment to parties on the part of sizable local majorities remembering crucial historical events (rescue from the Austrian Empire or the end of Fascism, for example). “Types” of voting, therefore, correlate highly with different places. But these places are, as with the two other perspectives on geography, presumably homogeneous regions that have not changed much down the years.

Mapping place and politics

The word “geography” does often convey a sense of permanence, so it is not surprising that fixed regional divisions have tended to be the major way in which geographical analysis has entered into understandings of Italian politics. Persisting regional differences, particularly that between the North and the South, have been elemental in Italian political discourse down the years. Thinking of geography as “dynamic” or based on the complexities of micro-geography described earlier, however, leads in a different direction.

Examining the long period of Italian national elections from 1948 until 1987 reveals a number of realigning elections when national vote changes were greater than usual and involved flows of votes beyond the typical left, right, and center “families” of parties within which votes were usually exchanged. The main shifts occurred in 1948 and 1953, when the Communist Party (PCI) emerged as the major party of the left and the Christian Democratic Party (DC) as the major party of the center; 1963, when the DC lost votes to the right and began its collaboration with the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) and the PCI began moving towards a center-left ideological position; and 1976, when the PCI increased its national vote from both new voters and voters from the center, and the DC received votes from the right. These substantial changes can be linked to shifts in the political geography of electoral choice (Agnew, 2002: 92–110). A breakdown of the variance of votes for the DC and PCI across all elections to the Chamber of Deputies from 1953 to 1987 at the provincial level shows that the provincial standard deviations from the national means go up from 1953 to 1968 but then drop precipitously from 1968 to 1976 with a significant increase from 1979 to 1987. I take these to signify the following: that before 1963 most of the variance was at the regional scale (the fourfold regionalization of Italy made by Galli and Prandi in 1970), which suggests that geographical difference was concentrated regionally; between 1963 and 1976 the votes for the two parties nationalized, which suggests a decline in regional clustering but without an increase in variance from within-region means; and between 1976 and 1987 a dramatic increase in within-region variances, which suggests an overall localization of trends in voting for the two parties. There was thus a dynamic flow to the political geography of Italian national elections – three regimes (regionalizing, nationalizing, and localizing) – that a static regional account or one focused entirely on national trends would have missed.

Different “logics” in different places seem to have determined how the votes were formed over time. No single national “cause” can account for these shifts in electoral variance. There certainly were some important forces at work throughout Italy: the arrival of administrative regions across the entire country in 1970, the movement of significant numbers of people from the interior of the south of the peninsula and from the islands to the industrial Northwest in the 1950s and 1960s, the “economic miracle” of the late 1950s and early 1960s increasing incomes and consumption across the board, the emergence of a dynamic sector of small firms geared towards artisanal production particularly in the Center and Northeast in the 1960s and 1970s, the differential secularization of the country with the Northeast standing out the longest against
the overall trend, the increased role of organized crime in politics in parts of the South in the 1970s and 1980s, and the deradicalization of the Communist Party and the emergence of widespread political violence associated with the extreme right and the extreme left in the 1970s. But these changes were all refracted through local lenses depending on the historical constellation of different parties and movements in different places and the mix of local and regional conditions and issues that one would expect would lead to different responses to external pressures. Such factors as prevalence of churchgoing, type of workplace and employment conditions, rural versus urban, loss of population, degree of local organized criminality, the prevalence of exchange voting, and so on are by most accounts crucial to the emergence of distinctive “logics” to aggregate vote shifts over time (Brusa, 1984; Cartocci, 1990; Agnew, 2002).

Between 1992 and 1994 the party system that had dominated Italy since 1948 disintegrated. This had its roots in both the collapse of the Cold War geopolitical division of the world that had given both of the major Italian parties a core part of their identities and the corruption scandals relating to the funding of the Socialist and Christian Democratic parties of the same epoch. In 1993, an electoral system based on 75 percent of seats from single-member majority vote districts and 25 percent from multi-member proportional representation (PR) contests replaced the previous proportional/party list system. The idea was to encourage parties to enter into pre-election compacts rather than post-election coalitions that had not had popular endorsement. In some quarters the hope was that the new system might also stimulate a more bipolar party system with alternation in office between left- and right-leaning parties. This system lasted until 2005, when it was replaced by a “top-up” PR system that rewarded the winning coalition with extra seats. This system was introduced by the then-center-right government to improve its electoral chances and lasted through the 2013 election. Its topping-up of seats at the regional level in Senate elections and nationally for the Chamber of Deputies was to prove particularly destabilizing in February 2013, when the center-left won (if narrowly in votes) in the Chamber, and the Senate was left divided because of the surprising success of the M5S Movement critical of the “party system” in the Senate election in crucial regions (see pp. 165–6).

After 1992 three political formations came to dominate Italian national politics until 2013: a center-right grouping under the leadership of the media tycoon Silvio Berlusconi, a center-left grouping that has become the Democratic Party, and a regionalist party, the Northern League. Berlusconi made himself the indispensable figure in putting together for substantial periods of time cross-regional and locality coalitions between his own party, initially called Forza Italia, Alleanza Nazionale (a party that developed from the neo-Fascist MSI), with most of its core support in Rome and scattered places in the South, and the Northern League (Diamanti, 2003; Shin and Agnew, 2008). Over the long haul, Berlusconi’s grouping was particularly successful in the North, especially in and around the largest cities such as Milan, and in the South around Naples and in Sicily. The center-left, meanwhile, retained a strong hold in central Italy and gained a hold in Basilicata in the South. The Northern League, for its part, tended to have its greatest success in the more rural parts of Lombardy and the Veneto in the North but with some expansion into similar settings in the Piedmont region (in the Northwest) and in Emilio Romagna (a “traditional” stronghold of the left) between 2006 and 2008.

In national terms, two coalitions organized along a basic left–right continuum increasingly accounted for most votes everywhere. This was so even if the left was increasingly neoliberal and decreasingly social democratic, and the center–right increasingly clerical and statist and decreasingly liberal in ideological orientation. The polarizing capacity of Berlusconi was undoubtedly important in this regard as he recruited other right-wing factions into his camp and institutionalized his alliance with the Northern League after 2001. Yet, there was a definite
geography to this bipolarity. If in the North Berlusconi had to share votes and seats with the Northern League, elsewhere he was faced with serious competition in the South but a dearth of opportunities in Central Italy, where the center-left party still exercised a considerable draw. Down the years, Berlusconi’s personality and activities, both business and personal, became increasingly central to his political appeal and to the arguments of his adversaries. No Italian political leader since Mussolini had attracted the attention and criticism that Berlusconi did inside and outside of the country (Agnew, 2011).

This attention was largely because his rise to political prominence had much to do with shepherding his business interests, and his wealth allowed him to behave according to norms that were exceptional by the public standards of other Italian politicians. As a political leader he was particularly attractive to those with instrumental views of government, fear of increased state regulation of their activities, and an attraction to the model of wild consumer capitalism with which Berlusconi strongly associated himself through the programming and advertising on his private television channels. Such people are to be found all over Italy. Italy has the largest number of self-employed people of any major industrialized country, symptomatic of the small average size of most businesses. But as maps of tax evasion (overwhelmingly in the South and areas of small firm concentration in the North: Corriere della Sera, 2011) and intensive television watching (urban peripheries everywhere and the rural South) tend to attest, there are also geographic pools of such people in places with histories of off-the-books employment, narrow profit margins in small businesses, and credit-based consumption. Berlusconi’s promises to reduce tax pressures, condone illegal building, and limit entry into professions all speak to this side of his appeal. At the same time, and ironically in light of charges about his personal behavior, he allied himself with the Church on questions relating to euthanasia, gay rights, and women’s rights. Such positions made him attractive to the most conservative Catholic constituencies concentrated in parts of the Veneto and the South (see Veltri, in this volume).

It was the unraveling of the Italian public economy because of increased spreads in bond yields between Italian and German bonds in late 2011 that put paid to Berlusconi’s last government. Berlusconi had been prime minister for all but five of the seventeen years from 1994 to 2011. He could not finally evade responsibility for the weakness of Italy within the Eurozone (e.g. Pianta, 2012). Even though his credentials as a successful businessman had helped bring him repeatedly to office, his failure to seriously address or arrest the declining state of the Italian economy must be the final epitaph on his role as a political leader. Perhaps the very secret of his political success, appealing to entrenched conservative business interests and religious identities, created the barrier to moving Italy as a whole in a new direction.

Though he made a remarkable comeback in the February 2013 national election after his seeming “disgrace” in 2011, partly through making promises for the repeal and restitution of previous payments for the property tax introduced by the “technocratic” Monti government in 2012, Berlusconi was not able to reconstitute the coalition of political forces located in different regions that had been the secret of his previous national electoral success (Repubblica, 2013).

**The politics of place: the Northern League**

Since the 1990s one of the most important political novelties of Italy has been the prominence of an avowedly regionalist party, the Northern League, within Italian national politics. This began life as a series of “leagues” across the different northern regions. If Berlusconi provided a substitute for the DC and PSI (particularly in the Northwest and South) and the Democratic Party was the result of a split in the PCI and the attraction of some of the more progressive elements in the DC, the Northern League, which debuted in the 1992 election, was the outcome...
of colonizing the perimeter and then achieving a high degree of electoral consensus in the core areas traditionally associated with strong support for the Christian Democrats in Lombardy and the Veneto (Shin and Agnew, 2008: 49–64; Passarelli and Tuorto, 2012: 21–42). This party appealed to a new territorial formulation of the problems facing “the North” or, as in a later formulation, “Padania,” particularly those of small businesses now without their old DC allies in Rome or local government. The onset of globalization had produced an ever-greater competitiveness in the economic sectors in which many places in northern Italy specialized and the League arose to answer the anxieties of those for whom the national government was an increasing irrelevance in this context. The overall approach emphasized the relative deprivation of the affluent North in relation to redistributive (and patronage) politics in Rome, which favored the “unproductive” South. Defense of local cultural differences from the Italian “norm,” hostility to immigrants, notwithstanding their role in the economy, and resentment directed at globalization and the powers of the European Union were all added to the repertoire of complaints at the center of the League’s electoral success.

Though claiming a regional basis to its complaints, the League has mainly appealed to localized identities and interests that are entrenched in only some sorts of places. Its activists are particularly localistic in their attachments (Passarelli and Tuorto, 2012:180–1). They and many of the party’s voters are united on such themes as the lack of local return on revenues sent to central government and the need to have greater local control over local resources. But this does not extend to massive support across the North from voters as a whole for the proposed secession of “Padania” from Italy, a major theme of the party in the late 1990s while out of government, or even to supporting the proposed devolution of powers to the administrative regions as proposed in a referendum of 2006. Indeed, that referendum revealed major differences within the North with only the most rural and peripheral areas in Lombardy and the Veneto giving a majority of votes in favor. Elsewhere in the North the “no vote” also tended to prevail. The Northern League’s roots, therefore, tend to be strong in only some types of place across northern Italy. So, even as its leaders have made claims about a larger region, these only resonate in certain places, not in others (Shin and Agnew, 2008: 128–31; Panebianco, 2010).

The League started out as a protest movement that few commentators expected to last as a significant presence in national politics. Obviously the movement found a niche for itself within the center-right constellation that Berlusconi put together in the early 1990s. Though the League was initially uncomfortable in the role of junior partner, after 1999 its leaders turned the party into a party of government, at local, regional, and national levels (Diamanti, 2011). Since then the party’s historical leader, Umberto Bossi, has also drifted away from the secessionist logic and neo-pagan rhetoric about northern cultural roots that had characterized the party in the late 1990s and that continued to inspire a certain element among the party’s active supporters (e.g. Passarelli and Tuorto, 2012; Guolo, 2011). By early 2012 Bossi’s diminished health, reliance on a dysfunctional family, and lack of ideological coherence had taken a toll. In a poll taken in early February 2012 most League supporters said they wanted him to leave his role as party secretary (Nasi, 2012a). In the 2013 national election, the League faded across the North, particularly in Piedmont and the Veneto, although at least partly as a result of re-entering into alliance with Berlusconi’s PDL. The only bright spot was the success of Roberto Maroni in being elected as governor of Lombardy in February 2013 in the same election that saw the party in retreat in national politics (Diamanti, 2013).

The dependence of the party on Bossi’s rhetorical excess or what the journalist Marco Belpolito (2012) calls his “oratory of gestures” had kept the party in the news at a time when the culture of celebrity was in the ascendency in Italy as elsewhere. But in the end this diminished the party in two ways that came to a head in 2012. The first was the failure of the party to deliver
much to its electorate by way of federalism or a shift in Italy’s public economy in favor of the North from its long period in office alongside Berlusconi (Ricolfi, 2012a, 2012b). The other was that the centrality of Bossi’s family and circle of friends to the enterprise and the lack of internal democracy within the party left it open to the scandal over the use of public funds that led to Bossi’s forced resignation as secretary of the party (Maltese, 2012; Repubblica, 2012). The League was the sole oppositional voice in the Italian parliament to the technocratic government of Mario Monti that had replaced Berlusconi in late 2011, so its future was hostage to whether it could ever find a new niche for itself in the absence of both Bossi and Berlusconi, the two men who had brought the League into a governing position but whose maneuverings had in the end not achieved much of anything for the mythic North or Padania that Bossi had singlehandedly invented.

Placeless politics?

It is not just the politics of place as exemplified by the Northern League that is now open to question. Recent trends can be read as signifying a crisis for thinking in terms of politics in place as well. This takes two forms, although both relate to issues of communication over distance.

The first, illustrated by the phenomenon that is Berlusconi, is the signal importance of control over the mass media, particularly television, for political outcomes. In this light, the conventional wisdom about the rise of Berlusconi has been almost entirely that his control over the main private television channels (gifted to him by his mentor Bettino Craxi when he was prime minister), plus his influence over the public ones (RAI) when in office, has given him a stranglehold over political messages and viewing a diet of shows devoted to consumption and the promise of celebrity habituated the population at large to his interests. Daniele Zolo (1999: 739) puts this as follows:

Not only is political communication almost totally absorbed by television, but so is the whole process of the legitimization of politicians, of the production of consensus and of the definition and negotiation of the issues that have no other location and, so to speak, no other symbolic places except television studios and popular entertainment programmes – to which the stars of the political firmament are invited.

Berlusconi undoubtedly has benefited from the agenda-setting potential of his television interests. Italians in general watch more television and receive more of their news from television than people in many other countries. That said, however, television tends to reinforce and mobilize voters who already share the perspectives they are absorbing (Diamanti, 2012a: 93–101). These they tend to acquire by other means, including from face-to-face social interaction. Television messages also must be interpreted in familiar terms. This is so much the case that, as Giovanni Sartori (1989: 189) says, television can encourage localism more than national homogenization because it takes attention off parties and puts it on politicians and their service to constituencies. Sartori worries that any sort of national “good” is lost between the extremes of “no place” and “my place.” Berlusconi’s success, therefore, must be put down more to his capacity to weld together a center-right coalition more successfully than his adversaries than simply to his control over television (Shin and Agnew, 2008).

A second trend involves the increased significance of so-called social media organized in relation to the Web and the technologies such as smartphones, laptop computers, and Skype associated with it. Politics need no longer have much if any grounding in place but people can be mobilized for various political goals over differing time spans by social media such as Twitter.
and Facebook and by means of Internet listservs and billboards. Exhibit A for this phenomenon in Italy has been the recent success of the Movimento Cinque Stelle (M5S movement) organized by the comedian Beppe Grillo (Corbetta and Gualmini, 2013; Bartlett et al., 2013). In the 2012 local elections, the M5S movement polled about 10 percent of the vote nationally and won several mayoral contests, including Parma’s (e.g. Severgnini, 2012; Urbinati, 2012). In the 2013 national elections it polled the largest number of votes of any single “party” (excluding Italian residents abroad), although was outnumbered overall by each of the two main electoral alliances. Its success led to its holding the balance of power in the Senate. The movement is organized almost entirely on the Web, which Grillo has used to effect mainly through a funny blog about the sins and vices of all existing parties and politicians, above all those in and supporting Italy’s previous technocratic government. The appeal, as with many current politicians, is to an “anti-politics” that casts political parties in a particularly dim light as instruments of corruption and destitution. It finds resonance with those most tuned in to new technologies (although Grillo himself is in his sixties) and facing a terrible job market in an Italian economy that has seen better days (e.g. Dinmore, 2011). But it also reflects the increasing disassociation between politics, in terms of popular demands and issues, on the one hand, and the realities of representative democracy, with politicians increasingly out of touch with ordinary people, on the other (Diamanti, 2012b). It is not simply an anti-politics movement. The “Grillo” phenomenon signifies a new way of articulating interests and identities but as yet without the capacity to aggregate these satisfactorily into a legislative agenda in the presence of existing parties with which the “movement” must negotiate. Mainstream political parties everywhere are in deep trouble because they no longer seem to either articulate or aggregate interests and identities adequately (Economist, 2012a). To outlast its current basis as a protest movement, the M5S will have to do both.

As with television but more interactively, the Web does portend a different range of information sources and cross-place mobilizing opportunities than existing mass media such as newspapers and magazines. But much of the newness associated with the technologies is simply a matter of fingertip delivery and timeliness more than a qualitative break with past modes of information and mobilization. Even as new technologies have expanded the total amount of communication, data from the United States suggest that some other modes of communication such as print and inter-personal of all types have maintained their popularity while radio and television have declined (Economist, 2012b). More interestingly in terms of the presumed effects of new technologies, numerous studies of social networking show that geographic constraints still exercise a strong influence over all social media. The probability of having social ties still decreases as a function of distance, which suggests strongly that the new social media tend to facilitate flows among existing social networks rather than serving to create them (e.g. Onnela et al., 2011). Polling data suggest that, irrespective of how they have been mobilized, the supporters of M5S differ little in fact from other voters in terms of their expectations of how future Italian governments should be formed (Nasi, 2012b) and that they can be found in some places much more than in others (lower-religiosity and higher-income areas, in particular) (Nasi, 2012c). Beppe Grillo himself has taken to traveling around Italy by bus to give his movement the “ground game” that retail politics still requires (Diamanti, 2012c). The “party” was the primary party in votes cast in 50 provinces out of 108 in 2013 but achieved its greatest successes in Sicily (where the Internet is not that widely used) and in Lazio and Lombardy, where a better case for the Internet’s role can be made but which are also the seats of Italy’s largest metropolitan areas and plausibly the largest concentrations of those most disillusioned with the existing party system. A placeless politics does not yet seem on the immediate horizon.
Conclusion

Italian politics has long been about a variety of projects – national, class, regional, and anti-politics – but all of these and the parties and movements that have been their instruments have been mediated geographically through the exigencies of everyday life as grounded in places. The “geography” of Italian politics has hitherto been thought of mainly in terms of fixed regions having continuous effects. But even this approach has been eclipsed in the face of trends to think of politics in terms of autonomous individuals operating entirely in relation to national-level influences. The burden of this chapter has been to lay out the case for a social psychology of politics that grounds political behavior in the settings of everyday life and that rather than seeing these as in decline sees them as of persisting, if dynamically charged, significance as the places they define change their configurations over time.

References

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