Clientelism

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Clientelism has been a central issue throughout the history of modern Italy and a prominent factor in analyses of its political system. Since the country’s unification in 1860, numerous historians, intellectuals, politicians and, more recently, social and political scientists have documented the persistence and ubiquity of individualized and localized political ties in which votes and political support are obtained in exchange for favours and services provided by political representatives to their voters.¹ Political and social modernization, the democratization of suffrage and the weakening of traditional notables’ patronage did not do away with clientelism; it has in fact persisted up to the present in new and different forms within mass parties and state institutions (see Chapter 8 in this volume).

This hallmark of the history of Italy is often presented as one of the manifestations of the country’s political ‘anomaly’. It has been associated with obstacles and difficulties in building the unitary state and forming national identity in the second half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, as it was later with the shortcomings of the country’s civic culture, the imperfections of the republican regime after the Second World War, or the spread of corruption that led to the fall of the ‘First Republic’ at the beginning of the 1990s. But clientelism may appear as something other than the symptom of a flawed democracy: not only has it taken on ‘virtuous’ forms by supporting the economic development of certain regions, but it has also constituted a ‘consensus mechanism’ involving in public life part of the electorate (interest groups, local social networks) because of their clientelistic bonds with part of the state bureaucracy, politicians or local party machines. However, this mechanism, based on principles far removed from democratic legitimacy, involves the risk of undermining citizens’ trust in the political system and accentuating tendencies to delegitimize the state.

From notables’ clientelism to party clientelism

As in many other Mediterranean societies, clientelism was commonly the form that social and political ties took in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Italy (Davis, 1977). Exchange of goods and services between notables (notabili) and the populations by and large structured political dependencies and loyalties, particularly in rural communities. For these, clientelism was a means of gaining access to scarce resources (land, employment, charity or protection) as a trade-off for their recognition of the prestige and statutory authority of the property owners.
and the members of the commercial bourgeoisie, the administration and the liberal professions, who constituted the majority of the political class of unified Italy. The gradual extension of suffrage between the 1882 reform (which gave the right to vote to almost a quarter of men aged 21 and over) and the establishment of universal suffrage for men in 1912 consolidated the power of notables. In a predominantly rural society marked by local particularisms, clientelism-based relations were one of the main means of mobilizing voters (Banti, 1996). They were also an instrument for territorial penetration of central government. The state was in fact able to intervene in peripheral regions through the mediation of notables, who relayed public action (administrative regulations, land-development and planning policies, social policies, etc.) and adapted it locally. The mediation of notables helped to familiarize people with modern political institutions while consolidating their own power through a clientelistic distribution of state resources (Silverman, 1965).

In the decades following the Second World War, economic development and urbanization, increased social and geographic mobility, the rise of mass parties and the expansion of state bureaucracies eroded the power of traditional notables considerably. This did not, however, do away with clientelism. Italy’s socio-economic and political modernization ushered in ‘party clientelism’, based on control over the distribution channels of public resources by a new political elite made up of ‘professional party politicians’ (Caciagli and Belloni, 1981). Particularly in the southern regions (the Mezzogiorno), first the agrarian reform and then regional development policies (for example, through the Cassa per il Mezzogiorno, a government agency set up in 1950 to support agricultural and infrastructure modernization) offered the new politicians significant resources to capture and keep their clienteles. These facilities chiefly benefited the members of the government parties, and most of all the Christian Democracy (Democrazia Cristiana, or DC) party. Under the leadership of its Secretary General, Amintore Fanfani, the DC adopted as of the second half of the 1950s a strategy of penetration of state institutions (national and local government, banks and public industries) thanks to which, by distributing public goods to voters through its elected officials and the agencies attached to them (organizations, unions, etc.), it was able to establish its hegemony for three successive decades (Ignazi, 1999). Clientelism, in this case, not only characterizes personal relationships in which political loyalty and support is given in return for jobs and services (as it appears in the traditional communities studied by anthropologists), but also a system of government in which patronage networks are incorporated into the State apparatus and participate in the running of modern political parties and bureaucracies.

‘Political machines’ and Christian Democratic power

This system of clientelistic distribution of resources through an organized mass party helped to reconcile traditional political practices with the economic and social modernization promoted by the DC and the Italian state. As has been demonstrated by Sidney Tarrow (1967), the transformation of the clientelism of the notables into the ‘clientelism of the bureaucracy’ was how the expanding of urban services, the new welfare policies (see Chapter 20 in this volume), programmes of support for the Mezzogiorno, etc. were concretely established. Client networks were deeply changed as a consequence, both in the nature and volume of resources circulating within them and in their forms of organization. This is perfectly illustrated by the case of Naples, which was studied by Percy Allum (1973). The growth in public resources (jobs, housing, assistance, funding of enterprises and organizations, public contracts, etc.) went hand in hand with the strengthening of the channels of their allocation by the local DC machinery. The latter thus became a top-down organization, linking groups of voters (neighbourhood committees,
professional associations, territorial sociability networks, as well as trade-union sections or economic interest groups) to mid-level leaders (local elected representatives, DC section secretaries, business leaders and public administration managers), themselves connected with the highest party leaders. These party leaders, backed by the electoral power they gained through clientelist exchanges within these networks, could then trade on this power with the national DC structures and obtain positions for themselves and their collaborators in the government and in the ‘parallel government-related institutions’ (sottogoverno). This in turn increased their ability to meet their voters’ demands and thereby to broaden and consolidate their electoral support.

This same system, in which influence on government institutions was combined with maintaining a substantial electoral base by means of the clientelism of political machines, was observed in several other southern cities. In Catania, for example, ‘new notables’ from the professionalized party machinery took over the DC in the early 1950s. This led to the establishment of an ‘extended chain of interest and fidelity’ around a ‘mass client party’ that could meet the demands of a wide variety of interest groups joined together in a ‘bloc of interests’ for which the party was the guarantor (Caciagli and Belloni, 1981: 45–6). Very similar power mechanics were highlighted in the case of Palermo, where control by the main local DC power centres allowed the party to set up differentiated clientelistic ties with the ‘white-collar middle class’ (the main beneficiary of public employment), the ‘local entrepreneurial class’ (which prospered thanks to public aid and contracts in a context of strong urban growth) and the ‘urban poor’ categories (integrated into personalized networks of dependency and loyalty to ‘neighbourhood bosses’ who provided protection and the aid resources indispensable to their livelihood) (Chubb, 1982). The mafia played an important role in these mechanisms, because of its influence on part of the electorate and its participation in corrupt networks involving entrepreneurs, politicians and criminal bosses (see Chapter 7 in this volume).

These urban political machines played a decisive role in maintaining the DC in power in the 1970s and 1980s. As has been noted by Carlo Trigilia (1992), the DC offset the decline in its vote in the northern and central regions by preserving its electoral strength in the Mezzogiorno. As a consequence, the national party organization was more dependent on local demands from the southern political class. This led to the deterioration of public action for development, which was more subject to the electoral and parochial interests of political actors than to the effectiveness and neutrality imperatives expected to guide the activity of modern bureaucracies and encourage an ‘autonomous’ development of productive forces released from political pressure (Trigilia, 1992: 82–3). This does not, however, mean that party clientelism was an exclusively southern phenomenon. In the ‘white’ areas, the DC’s political strength was drawn from its ability to embody and defend the values and lifestyles of Catholic circles. Nonetheless, it was also explained by ‘the importance of material assistance to the local populations by Catholic organizations’ and by an ideological mobilization associated, in this case, with the offer of individualized resources (jobs, financial and technical support, participation in leisure activities, etc.) by numerous organizations (parishes, trade unions, banks, rural associations, etc.) attached to the DC (Allum, 1995: 33).

**Clientelism and partitocrazia**

The importance of clientelistic links in maintaining the DC electorate explains their influence, not only on the operations of local political machines but also on national political institutions and the state itself. Indeed, grounding electoral consensus in the clientelistic distribution of public resources affected the activity of public bureaucracies. Having little autonomy with respect to
the dominant political parties, public bureaucracies tended to respond primarily to requests from the pressure groups most directly related to these parties through ideological proximity and social collusion (parentela) or best integrated into the DC leaders’ client networks (clientela) (La Palombara, 1964). As a result of the state’s strong presence in the industrial sectors (through the Ministry of State Participation and public banks), the agricultural sectors (through the Cassa per il Mezzogiorno and the many public agencies under the Federconsorzi umbrella) and the social sectors (pension funds, insurance, etc.), many public policies responded to a specific and fragmented logic in which decision-making processes were largely influenced by the electoral interests of political leaders and the corporatist ties they had established with certain interest groups (Paci, 1989).

The importance of clientelistic mechanisms in Italian political life also affected the legislative process, emphasizing inter-party negotiations on laws relating to corporatist or local ‘micro-interests’ at the expense of Parliament’s capacity for taking initiatives, providing guidance and controlling public action (Di Palma, 1977). Furthermore, it encouraged the DC’s splitting into competing factions, which contributed to undermining government alliances and to subjecting the decisions of the executive branch and of public administrations to the interests of heterogeneous groups and of internal currents in the majority party competing for the allocation of resources and positions in public and para-public institutions (lotizzazione). The DC was thus described as a coalition of ‘groups of power’ led by the leaders of currents (capi correnti) and made up of ‘political clienteles depend[ing] for their survival on the control of governmental positions’ and on the ‘patronage opportunities’ offered by these positions (Zuckerman, 1979: 136).

This extension of the logic of the local political machine across the national political system emerged as one of the characteristics of Italian partitocrazia (party control of the state), in which clientelistic exchanges involved organized groups at the national level: on the one hand, political parties, the parties’ internal factions, central government agencies, local administrations, and/or parastatal institutions; on the other, pressure and interest groups, professional associations, trade unions, and/or local power alliances. Not only did partitocrazia change local clientelism into ‘state clientelism’, given the ‘massive use of public resources’ and the ‘colonization’ of public institutions by government parties (Pasquino, 1995: 347–8); it also translated into the generalization of client-based ‘consensus mechanisms’. As demonstrated by Alessandro Pizzorno (1974), the ‘individualistic voter-mobilization strategy’ that prevailed in Italy since the end of the Second World War, mainly the DC’s, favoured the distribution of material ‘benefits’ to the middle classes, who constituted the regime’s main supporters, at the expense of the ‘institutionalization of their collective claims’. As a result, clientelism was generalized as the ‘power-formation channel’ to meet the social demands of large sections of the electorate and thus to ensure the stability of the political system.

**Perverse effects of clientelism**

The majority of analyses of clientelism have stressed its perverse effects or, at the very least, the ‘anomaly’ of its massive presence in the context of a modern democracy (Briquet, 2009). This perspective was first formulated at the end of the 1950s and beginning of the 1960s by a number of political scientists such as Edward Banfield (1958) or Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba (1963). In his monograph on a rural community in the Basilicata region, Banfield suggested for the Mezzogiorno the image of a ‘backward’ society marked by ‘amoral familism’, in which interest in public affairs was exclusively determined by the hope of maximizing the ‘material, short-run advantage of the nuclear family’ (Banfield, 1958: 85). Comparative research on attitudes to
democracy in five European countries conducted a few years later by Almond and Verba confirmed this image. In their study, Italy was shown as a country with ‘premodern’ social structures and a ‘parochial’, weakly participatory political culture, which resulted in a chiefly ‘pragmatic’ and ‘instrumental’ relationship to public institutions amongst the major part of the population. According to the authors, this type of culture encouraged clientelism and could not support a ‘stable and effective democratic system’ (Almond and Verba, 1963: 308–10). Clientelism then appeared as a manifestation of the anomalies of the Italian political system, of the distance that separated it from developed democracies, which are characterized by the active participation of citizens in public affairs and the force of ‘civic culture’. Sidney Tarrow (1967) also pointed to clientelism as one of the signs of the gap between political systems in the south of Italy and those of a ‘modern system of representation’; he related this, however, more to the ‘atypical’ modernization trajectory of the Mezzogiorno than to the peculiarities of its culture.

Marked by a dominant paradigm consisting in identifying and explaining the deficiencies of the Italian political system and its ‘deficit in modernity’ (Mastropaolo, 2000), subsequent analyses of clientelism reformulated the ‘anomaly’ theory and extended it. According to Mario Caciagli and Frank Belloni (1981), for example, although clientelism was instrumentalized to politicize the southern populations (integrated into national politics through mass clientelistic parties) and to help the economic development of the Mezzogiorno (through redistribution of the financial flows that they were allocated), it also heightened the deviant aspects of these processes. It acted as an obstacle to citizens’ ‘political maturity’ by preventing the autonomous expression of civil society and the collective defence of social interests. It condemned the southern regions to precarious economic development because they were almost exclusively dependent on intervention from the state, itself subjected to the electioneering aims of political leaders, whose legitimacy was weakened by the fact that voter loyalty depended only on material and short-term benefits.

Clientelism therefore affected the political system in two ways: first, it reduced the efficiency of institutions by privatizing state power and limiting the autonomy of public bureaucracies as well as their coordination and programming capacities; second, it undermined the legitimacy of those institutions by making their relationship to citizens exclusively instrumental. It thus appeared as an ‘obstacle to the institutionalization of authority’ and to a sustainable legitimization of the political system. It prevented the formation of diffuse political support based on collective and ideological values and on the principles of impartiality, universalism, and the separation of public roles and the private roles that constituted political leaders’ ‘reserves of social credit’ (Graziano, 1980: 53–4). Ultimately, it made the political stability of the regime dependent on the capacity of its leaders to meet voters’ material interests at the risk of seeing the legitimacy of the regime challenged if the ruling classes were no longer able to meet the material expectations of its electoral base as a result of a lack of sustained economic growth or an inflation in the social demands that were addressed to them.

The ‘virtuous circles’ of clientelism

Some authors have qualified the binary conception described above, which considers clientelism in an exclusively antagonistic relationship with democratic accomplishment and thereby presents it as a dysfunctional political ‘anomaly’. Simona Piattoni (1998), in her comparative research on the evolution of politics in the Abruzzo and Apulia regions in the second half of the twentieth century, proposed in this regard the notion of ‘virtuous clientelism’. On the basis of a strategic conception of clientelism, considered as a means chosen by politicians to maximize their power resources, she argues that clientelism may, in some cases, promote economic development and
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contribute to the establishment of political practices more in line with democratic standards. While in Apulia, a weak opposition, coupled with strong divisions within the government parties led to the formation of fragmented clientelism networks lavishing ‘selective goods’ only on their members, the political elites in Abruzzo combined the offer of private goods and public goods to strengthen their position against a powerful and unified opposition.

This resulted, in the first case, in uncoordinated and inefficient public action by the local political ‘bosses’, seeking primarily to manipulate administrative and political action to protect the interests of their own clienteles alone. Conversely, in the second case, the regional DC leaders consolidated their position as ‘brokers’ by extending provision of goods and services beyond just their supporters. To safeguard their control over the public-resource allocation channels on which their power relied, they entered into a variety of collaboration and exchange relations with all the local actors (entrepreneurs, interest groups, organizations, etc.), whose claims they conveyed and whose interests they defended to central government. They supported the industrial sector by providing the financial aid and logistical support needed for its development, and promoted collective citizenship in the form of ‘constituency services’ intended for the whole community.

By channelling government resources to their constituency and using the expertise of public bureaucracies, a number of political leaders therefore actively participated in the modernization of their territory while preserving their electoral influence by controlling and manipulating these resources. Clientelism practices in this case were combined with the development of modern infrastructure (transport, hospitals, housing, etc.); they contributed to the improvement of the populations’ living conditions by creating jobs and improving education and social-welfare policies (Zuckerman, 1997). As has been shown in particular by Gabriella Gribaudi (1990), clientelism was the means by which modern political institutions actually took root in certain regions. In the Mezzogiorno in particular,

the very important social and economic transformation processes found in the local societies the channels through which they were expressed. The relationship with the state and the public institutions may be thus considered as a relationship of selective and adaptive use . . . [The state] adopts the forms imposed by the local society, by controlling its resources, channelling them through non-institutional networks and chains of personal relationships governed by motivations that are different from those proclaimed by the institutions.

(Gribaudi, 1990: 284)

The former clientelistic practices were thus reconstructed to adapt to new forms of public action, the official logic of which they altered, however, by subjecting them to the local actors’ social standards and practical interests.

Recent political transformations and changes in clientelism

Clientelism thus turned out to be a channel for political and socio-economic modernization, but it was also one of the factors in the development of deviant behaviour in political spheres, in particular, corruption. Although for analytical purposes the two phenomena need to be distinguished, in practice they were frequently combined. Many of the testimonies collected in the late 1980s and early 1990s by anti-corruption magistrates indicate that the services requested from ‘protected’ entrepreneurs by corrupt politicians were not only monetary; they could also be to provide jobs or a variety of services to the politicians’ supporters. More generally, resources
obtained through corruption were frequently used to consolidate the corrupt politicians’ electoral base (Della Porta, 1992). The complementarity of clientelism and corruption is explained by the features they have in common. In both cases, there are benefits based on the privatization of public institutions tending to promote an instrumental conception of politics, to erode the public-commitment ideal, and to promote, within the parties, ‘business politicians’ who are part of exchange-and-favour networks in which electoral constituencies and circles of political and business collusion are interwoven. On the other hand, the two phenomena reinforce each other through a ‘vicious circle’ dynamics revealed by Donatella Della Porta and Alberto Vannucci (1994): ‘business politicians’ sustain their clientele by controlling significant material resources and by increasing the ‘corruption offer’ to entrepreneurs; corrupt politicians gain access to positions of power in the party apparatus and increase their power to influence public administrations; they thus have control over new resources, which they use to get votes and political support; this in turn fuels clientelism.7

The spread of corruption in political circles was one of the causes of the fall of the ‘First Republic’ between 1992 and 1994. By revealing the extent of illegal practices within the governing classes, anti-corruption and anti-mafia judges accelerated the moral discrediting of the regime and sparked demand for change amongst broad sectors of the electorate. This also offered new political actors powerful arguments and legitimating repertoires to assert themselves in the political arena against the old established elites in the name of the necessary revitalization of public life (Briquet, 2007). Judicial investigations, however, simply sped up a process that had originated upstream of the crisis and can be related to ‘government party’ dysfunctions and the clientelist political consensus-building mechanisms associated with them. Indeed, although these mechanisms had long guaranteed support to the regime by a majority of voters and ensured its stability, they had at the same time eroded its overall legitimacy. ‘Macro-political’ competition (relating to major social choices and ideological issues) was gradually supplanted by ‘micro-political’ competition (dealing with the management and defence of vested interests). As a consequence, in addition to the extension of deviant behaviour amongst the ruling elites, the government’s programmatic-proposal capacities were weakened and the political system became more vulnerable as it faced an increase in particularistic voter requests and a scarcity of state resources as a result of the worsening of its financial difficulties and budgetary constraints that was related to European integration (Cotta, 1994). The crisis in the Christian Democratic regime thus appears as the ultimate manifestation of the contradictions of ‘partitocrazia clientelism’, laid bare by political scandals and causing a brutal collapse of the legitimacy of the ruling class in the eyes of the citizens.

It remains to be seen whether the aspirations for change and moralization of democracy expressed during the ‘First Republic’ crisis has led to a lessening of the weight of clientelism in public life. Only assumptions and lines of thought can be advanced by way of conclusion. On the one hand, privatizations and the state’s disengagement from productive sectors in which it had previously been massively involved, the greater autonomy of administrations with regard to political authorities, and budgetary constraints leading to fewer public-sector jobs have certainly restricted opportunities for politicians to satisfy voters’ particularistic demands. In addition, local government reforms since 1993 appear to have triggered dynamics that are not conducive to the development of clientelism. Associated with local-government modernization measures, the change to a majority-based voting system for the designation of local leaders has improved the latter’s decision-making capacities, weakened party tutelage over their activities, and led to the establishment of more transparent forms of consultation with representatives of local interests (Trigilia, 2002).
On the other hand, however, national and local political authorities have maintained a decisive position in the distribution of many resources that could be used for clientelistic purposes; they have them available either directly (national and local government jobs, public aid) or indirectly (through organizations, businesses, and public and para-public institutions active in the new public-management cooperation networks). Moreover, the persistence of territory-based political affiliations and personal solidarity networks and the exchanges on which they are based (Diamanti, 2012) can contribute to the formation of new local political notables inclined to secure voter loyalty through selective incentives similar to those of the former political clientelism. More generally, as has been argued by Jonathan Hopkin and Alfio Mastropaolo (2001: 171),

the postmodern age, characterized by the absence of ideological mobilization, the decline of the great social cleavages and collective identities of class and religion, a growing social differentiation, and an exaggerated emphasis in particularistic interests, would appear to provide fertile ground for the resurgence of clientelism.

This clientelism is now one of the main instruments of social and political integration in modern societies. The revelations during the corruption scandals that punctuated Italy’s recent political history, the judicial authorities’ regular whistleblowing on widespread illegality in administrative action, which favours clientelist uses of public funds, and the recurrent controversies stirred by the denunciation of the privileges and abuses of the political class all tend to confirm this diagnosis. They call for social and political sciences to revive empirical research on clientelism phenomena and their reshaping today in Italy’s new political landscape.

(Translated from French by Marina Urquidi)

Notes
1 For a detailed overall discussion of the concept of clientelism, see for instance Eisenstadt and Roniger (1984) or, with special attention to the case of Italy, Piattoni (2005).
2 Between 1972 and 1992, the DC’s parliamentary election scores declined from 38 per cent to 25 per cent in the northern and central regions while remaining stable (42 per cent to 40 per cent) in the southern regions. The Mezzogiorno share in the DC vote thus increased during this period from 32 per cent to 42 per cent (Trigilia, 1992: 66).
3 The ‘white’ areas (zone bianche) are the northern regions of Italy in which the DC, closely associated with the Church and Catholic associations, has long been dominant.
4 Robert Putnam (1993) later proposed a revised version of this theory, in which the greater or lesser capacity of Italian regional administrations to respond effectively to the needs of the populations was attributed to the degree of civicness of a local society. In contrast to the northern regions, the long historical trajectory of which led to the formation of a culture of participation in collective life and cooperation and trust between individuals, institutional action was inefficient in those of the south, which was characterized by mistrust, the weakness of collective collaborative networks and clientelism.
5 More specifically, Tarrow attributed this ‘atypical’ modernization to the process of integration of the southern regions in the Italian state on the basis of the ‘traditional’ characteristics of their social structure (see in particular Tarrow, 1967: 71–95).
6 Corruption is an illegal exchange between public-office holders and economic actors based on mutual and specific benefits: secret funding for the former and secure access to government contracts for the latter. Clientelism is also an exchange of services involving public actors, but in which they trade favours and private services with voters in return for their electoral support in a less clearly commodified relationship than in the case of corruption, and it is not necessarily illegal (Della Porta, 1993).
As has been observed by Luigi Musella (2000: 141–2), their integration into corruption networks helped ‘new leaders’ to be given leading positions in the government parties from the late 1970s onwards. This was due in particular to the parties’ increased funding needs and the crucial role taken by corruption practices to meet these needs.

Bibliography


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