The Teaching of Comparative Politics in Italy: A Course in Search of Its Role?*

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What is the place of Comparative Politics in the Italian university programs in Political Sciences? This can hardly be considered as a secondary issue in a country where, almost forty years ago, the national Political Science flagship review opened its first issue with an article written by its founder, Giovanni Sartori, titled “La politica comparata: premesse e problemi” (Sartori 1971). In fact, Comparative Politics (CP from now on) has always been considered more than just one of the subfields of Political Science. It has been, indeed, the distinctive method for controlling political science hypotheses, as a “specialization of the scientific method […] in general” (Sartori 1991, 30). Furthermore, if we take Sartori’s lesson seriously, it should be considered as a mandatory step in the methodological education of students interested in analysing political phenomena.

In the following pages I will thus articulate the puzzle opening this article about the “place” of comparative politics in our universities, breaking it down into the following questions: Where are CP courses placed in Italian political science programs? What do we teach in such courses? With which teaching materials? And finally, what are CP courses useful for in the educational path of Italian students?

The diffusion of comparative politics courses

As far as the Academic Year 2009/2010 is concerned, CP is taught in 19 universities. In two cases courses are in faculties of Sociology (Trento and Napoli Federico II), while in the remaining 17 universities they are taught in faculties of Political Sciences. In half of the cases CP is taught as a last-year course of the laurea (the initial level degree), in another half it is taught as a laurea magistrale (the advanced level degree) course. This does not involve a big change in substantial terms: in all programs, students facing the course of CP have already taken also the main teaching of the discipline, Political Science, and CP is always meant as an advanced (or at least, non-introductory) teaching. As we know from a previous investigation (Capano and Tronconi 2005), it is among the most frequent teachings – where politics courses are present – beyond the introduction to the discipline (tab. 1). This does not come as a surprise: as I was saying above, Sartori’s imprinting in the diffusion of the discipline is clearly visible in Italy, as it is the idea that CP ought to be the main tool for the empirical investigation of political institutions and behaviours.

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Table 1. Political Science teaching: sub-disciplines (Academic Year 2003-2004).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>N. of courses</th>
<th>N. of Universities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Political Science</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International Relations</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Administration and Organizational Theory</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comparative Politics</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Policy</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European Political Studies</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local Government</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Communication</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italian Political System</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology of Political Science</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parties and Interest Groups</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Theory</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>273</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The reduced number of programs where CP is offered (31 in 2003-2004 against 19 in 2009-2010) must be read in the context of a general effort to reduce the number of courses, which had boomed after the 2001 reform, and consequently raise the number of credits per course.

In three cases – at the University of Padova, at the University of Siena and at the Bocconi University in Milan – the course is offered in English, while in another few cases a selection of readings in English is required, while classes are held in Italian. Also the format of classes and exams goes often beyond the traditional lecture and oral colloquium at the end of the course. Students are in most cases expected to attend classes regularly and to participate actively through discussions and presentations on assigned topics. Only in a couple of cases exams are to be taken in the traditional Italian form of an oral colloquium, it is on the contrary much more common to evaluate students through a mix of more “innovative” tests such as written answers to short essay-questions, class presentations on assigned readings, and a paper in the form of an original piece of research elaborating on a topic, or applying to one or more cases some of the theoretical tools that have been discussed in class.

In sum, CP courses are generally addressed to students at an advanced stage of their academic path, who are supposed to be already aware of the basic concepts of the discipline and are motivated to get a deeper methodological and substantial competence, or even to specialise in Political Science and make it (possibly in one of its sub-disciplines) the topic of the laurea or laurea magistrale thesis. This aim is reached through classes offered to a relatively small number of students, as it is typical of advanced level teaching, and through course formats involving some active...
participation of the students themselves, something that is not possible in most introductory level courses.

**What we teach in Comparative Politics courses - And what we don’t**

From the point of view of the lecturer CP, encompassing in a sense all possible fields of study of political science, allows for the greatest freedom in choosing topics, approaches, teaching materials. In practice though, most CP courses follow a common format, and cover a number of rather standardised topics. In most cases part of the classes, at least, are devoted to presenting the main features of western democratic systems, such as the evolution of their electoral and party systems, forms of government, cabinets formation, structure and functioning of legislative assemblies. To this aim, the textbooks of Gianfranco Pasquino (2003), Salvatore Vassallo (2005), Sergio Fabbrini (2008) are often used; in some cases the translations of the classical works of Lijphart (2001) and Rokkan (2002) are also included, in part or entirely, in the course syllabi. In line with a consolidated tradition of Italian university, the decision not to adopt any textbook is rare: in such cases CP lecturers rely on a list of readings (book chapters and review articles), mainly in English.

Methodological issues are often covered too. In most courses this is done in two or three classes at the beginning of the semester, but in a some cases methodology, specifically understood as the logic of comparative research, the choice of the unit of analysis and the choice of cases to be compared, is the object of a whole module. In such cases the preferences go to the textbooks of Guy Peters (2001), Morlino (2005), Bolgherini and Caciagli (2008), which present the methodological aspects through a review of some classical comparative works. On the contrary, no one is adopting the classical book authored by Smelser in 1982 nor the one edited by Sartori and Morlino in 1991 anymore.

While the decision to focus only on a specific topic is limited to a couple of cases (interest groups and parliaments respectively), about half of the courses taught in 2009-2010 foresees a monographic module beyond the general (or methodological) introductory classes. Here the possible choices are virtually unlimited. Concretely, democratic transitions are the most popular subject, reflecting the huge diffusion of these studies in the international literature in the last two decades. Here the translations of the works of Huntington (1995) and Linz and Stepan (2000) and the works of Morlino (2003) and Grassi (2008) are used. Other topics are regionalism (Caciagli 2003; Bolgherini 2006), parliaments (Pelizzo and Pasquino 2006; Battegazzorre 2007), political parties (Massari 2004; Grilli di Cortona and Pasquino 2007), klientelism (Roth 1990; Piattoni 2007; Caciagli 2009).

Scrolling the above list of topics and textbooks, one remark seems necessary. Italian students of CP do not have a chance to stretch their view of politics beyond European or, at best, Western democracies. It is true that some courses focus on democratic transitions, thus including Central and Eastern European countries and sometimes the main Latin-American ones. On the other hand studying democratic transitions is not the same as studying political systems as such, and it is a fact that our attention to the most relevant emerging global actors (China, India, Brazil, ...}
Russia, South Africa, Iran) is, to say the least, scarce. Thus, students' knowledge of these countries can only rely on area studies, were they are available, which are most often taught by historians, rather than by political scientists. It is true that these kind of courses are often de facto political science courses, as contemporary political systems of these countries or areas are at the centre of the syllabus, more than history. It follows that a sort of division of labour exists, between area historians, who teach on emerging global powers, and political scientists, who teach on western European countries and, sometimes, the US. There is no need to say what, between the two, looks more interesting to the eyes of students.

Then, what is the place for comparative politics?

As an undergraduate student, I had the fortunate opportunity to spend one semester at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C.. There I attended, among others, the CP course. To my surprise, the course was attended by students in their first or second year of study and considered, together with the course of American politics, as an introduction to the discipline. The emphasis was put on the presentation of "facts", on showing the variety of non-US political systems and their components, and shedding light on the differences with the political system of the US. Throughout the course, theory remained most of the time on the background.

As I understood later on, this is a common habit in American political science programs, and reflects a clear choice: differently from Italy, students are first exposed to a general knowledge of political phenomena, and only at a more advanced stage, they are invited to raise more complex theoretical buildings on specific areas of the discipline. Interesting to note, a general course of political science is rarely present. CP and American politics lay the foundations for more advanced courses, focusing on specific issues of each sub-discipline.

In Italy, we traditionally follow an opposite path: students' first approach to the discipline, in political science courses, is largely oriented to a presentation of models, classifications, and theoretical traditions. This fund of knowledge is successively used to describe and interpret political phenomena, but only by those students who decide to specialise in political science, or who do have such an opportunity.

An alternative path, close to the American example, could be imagined, with students of the laurea triennale exposed to an Italian Politics course in their first (or second) year, and to a Comparative Political Systems course in their second (or third) year, where this would be meant as a presentation of the variety of political systems and of their components within and beyond Europe and the western world. Theory-oriented courses would come at a later stage, focusing on political

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1 Just to have a term for comparison, consider the updated version of the classical Almond and Powell volume, still one of the most diffused English-language textbook of comparative politics (Almond et al. 2008). After the introductory chapters on the basic concepts and components of political systems, the book covers the following countries: England (sic), France, Germany, Japan, Russia, China, Mexico, Brazil, Egypt, India, Nigeria and the United States.

2 The course was taught, and still is, by Professor Charles King. The syllabus has not changed very much, and is now available online: http://www9.georgetown.edu/faculty/kingch/govt_121_syllabus_fall_08.html
participation in its numerous forms, political institutions, public policies, that is to say, the input side, the “black box”, and the output side of the political system according to the classical model devised by David Easton.

The American option is not necessarily to be seen as a better one. Nonetheless, within a program of study focusing on politics, the role of CP is clear – an introduction not to the discipline of political science as such, but to the features of the most relevant political systems of contemporary world. In the Italian case the presentation of information on contemporary political systems comes only at an advanced stage, only for a limited number of students, in many cases at the level of Laurea Magistrale; on the other hand, a corpus of political science theories is presented, in the initial years of academic programs, to students who often lack the basic notions about Italian and world politics. With the consolidation of the 3+2 university track, it is perhaps time to discuss if this is still the most appropriate choice.

References


