

Bringing the History Back into Social and Political Sciences

Mattia Diletti

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Abstract

This contribution is based on four assumptions: 1) the social and political sciences should rebuild a systematic relationship with history, 2) this is urgent if we want to give depth to the analysis of new phenomena on a global scale that have characterized this long decade following the Great Recession, 3) sociology and political science need to build research of a comparative nature that will stand the test of time, 4) the crisis of democracies is the unifying topic that today requires a comparison between the crisis of American democracy with the crises of European democracies. This, however, can be done realistically only by understanding the historical uniqueness that characterizes each political system.

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Mattia Diletti: Università degli Studi di Roma La Sapienza (Italy)

ORCID <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9296-9078>

✉ mattia.diletti@uniroma1.it

Mattia Diletti is Researcher at “Sapienza”, University of Rome, where he teaches Political Science and Public Policy. In 2020, with Alessandro Coppola, he edited the book “Radicali all’azione! Organizzare i senza potere” (edizioni dell’asino), the first Italian translation of “Reveille for Radicals” by Saul Alinsky. With Marco Morini he coordinates the SPAM Observatory—“Società e Politica Americana”, Department of Communication and Social Research, “Sapienza”, University of Rome.

1 Political Science and History: A Complicated Relationship

The author of this article is a political scientist, whose point of view is influenced by the internal debate within this discipline, and also by the internal debate within this discipline in the author's country, Italy. The internal debate within the disciplines, thanks to the acceleration of the processes of internationalization of academic work in the last twenty-five years, is becoming less and less "national," but it is still very strongly influenced by the element of physical proximity, despite the pandemic, by the existence of national networks, and by national university recruitment systems, which tend to regulate the models of scientific production.

In the internal debate of the Italian Society of Political Science, a standing group called "Politics and History" was formed, which in turn was influenced by the theoretical work of Massimo Paci, author of *Lezioni di Sociologia storica*, a volume published in 2013.¹ These *Lezioni* define the scientific perimeter of historical sociology, which is still a weak sub-sector in Italy, especially when compared with the development it has experienced in Europe and especially in the United States. The book rereads classic authors, such as Durkheim, Marx, Gramsci, Weber, Elias and Aron, up to Bourdieu and the main exponents of contemporary historical sociology. These authors are linked by the search for a causal explanation of observed phenomena, a causal explanation that is deeply linked to the historical genesis of the phenomena.

In Italy, therefore, in 2018 Marco Almagisti, Carlo Baccetti and Paolo Graziano edited *Introduzione alla politologia storica*, with contributions from many authors. These political scientists and political sociologists worked on the study of long-term changes as an interpretative key of contemporaneity, in particular through the study of the transformations of political parties and political cultures, both in the dimension of single case studies and comparative studies.

These groups of scholars have looked at the American case with some envy. In the volume previously cited, they discuss the seminal works of Reinhard Bendix, *Nation Building and Citizenship* (1969), Barrington Moore's *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (1966), and the extensive literature of Theda Skocpol. More specifically, the group cited *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia and China* (1979) and *Doubly Engaged Social Science: The Promise of Comparative Historical Analysis* (2003). The latter argues how, in the United States, comparative historical analysis had come of age long ago as one of the most fruitful research approaches in modern social science.²

Missing from the volume's list of citations is perhaps another very important text by Theda Skocpol from 2004, *Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civic Life*, a fundamental book for understanding some of the causes of the American democratic crisis.³ Another citation that is also missing is an in-depth analysis of an important sub-field of American political science, namely, that of American Political Development. Karen Orren and Stephen Skowronek, in fact, described the theoretical reasons why politics should be studied "historically" in a well-known book, *The Search for American Political Development*.⁴ Orren and Skowronek's thinking appeared during the same period as Skocpol's, i.e., about twenty years ago, and was later updated in 2016 when the two scholars returned to the topic in an essay entitled *Pathways to the Present: Political Development in America*, which appeared in the 2016 *Oxford Handbook of American Political Development*.

Considering Europe, Italy and the United States, it is evident that we are talking about very different paths, which are not comparable in terms of academic success, institutionalization and scientific production. Scholars' academic and biographical paths are also different, as are their motivations,

1. Massimo Paci, *Lezioni di Sociologia storica* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2013).
2. Reinhard Bendix, *Nation Building and Citizenship* (New York: Wiley, 1964); Barrington Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966); Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia and China from 1979* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Theda Skocpol, "Doubly Engaged Social Science: The Promise of Comparative Historical Analysis," in J. Mahoney and D. Rueschemeyer, eds., *Comparative Historical Analysis in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 407–428.
3. Theda Skocpol, *Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civic Life* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004).
4. Karen Orren and Stephen Skowronek, *The Search for American Political Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

biographies and cultural environments. Yet, a broader and more articulate survey of the literature of those who have built bridges between disciplines, and established themselves in the interstices of interdisciplinarity, is still a good cause.

An “old” good cause, which Leonardo Morlino had already suggested to Italian political scientists, not first and not last, more than three decades ago, states:

The problem today is that of relations between fields of knowledge, instead of borders, as it was before. Indeed, paradoxically, the most significant contributions have come precisely from intermediate fields between philosophy and political science, between history and political science, between economics and political science, between sociology and political science.⁵

While the problem of relationships between disciplines never really finds a solution, the need for debating the crisis of democracy on both sides of the Atlantic is increasingly evident. And this is today’s “good cause,” for both historians and social and political scientists.

2 History and Political Science: Today’s Challenges between America and Europe

The list of misunderstandings in dealing with phenomena that have to do with the democratic crisis may be quite long. We have been discussing the democratic crisis for a long time, and basically we really only know two things, namely, 1) the solutions proposed by Crozier, Huntington and Watanuki in *The Crisis of Democracy* in 1975 have become part of the problem, while governments and societies are again looking for a new paradigm “to handle” democracy; 2) non-democratic governments have never been so healthy as now in the last thirty years, while we all clearly perceive the distrust of the citizens of democratic countries towards their institutions. This phenomenon has been analyzed for many years, but it has taken on new meaning after the January 6, 2021 assault on the American Congress, when ruthless political entrepreneurs and violent minorities joined forces in an unprecedented alliance.

Let us take one key concept related to the crisis of democracy, one buzz-word of both academic literature and public debate such as populism. Since 2016, when Donald Trump won the American presidential election and British citizens voted for Brexit, studies on populism have multiplied, and scholars who have treated the topic for decades have taken center stage.

The emergence or re-emergence of a phenomenon depends on multiple factors, as well as its public dissemination. In 2016 the American public debate was influenced by the release of John Judis’ ambitious volume, *The Populist Explosion*,⁶ in which he offered a sometimes Manichean version of the emergence of global populism.⁷ For example, Judis suggests his own unified theory of populism and the causes of its emergence in the United States, where stagnant wages, corporate deserts and widespread fear of being cast adrift in the global economy have brought Bernie Sanders and Trump together in their contempt for trade deals.

This view of the reasons that would unite pro-Sanders voters with pro-Trump voters extends to the European cases addressed by Judis, although he distinguishes so-called left-wing populism from right-wing populism. He is eager to distinguish the left-wing economic populism of Sanders and the anti-elite Podemos Party in Spain, with the champion, “the people,” against the one percent, from the right-wing cultural populism of Trump and the anti-Muslim Danish People’s Party. The difference is that right-wing populists accuse the elite of coddling an ever-shifting third group—immigrants, blacks, terrorists, welfare recipients, or all of the above.

In an attempt to represent the reasons for the populist wave, it often happens that the debate becomes oversimplified at the expense of an in-depth discussion of the roots of democratic crises. Very

5. Marco Almagisti, Carlo Baccetti and Paolo Graziano, eds., *Introduzione alla politologia storica* (Rome: Carocci, 2018).

6. John Judis, *The Populist Explosion* (New York: Columbia Global Reports, 2016).

7. For a more accurate reconstruction, see Carlos De La Torre, ed., *The Routledge Handbook of Global Populism* (Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge, 2018).

often, whoever gets there first is able to shape the public debate. Think, for example, of a successful simplification such as that of *The Economist*, which in July 2016 spoke of a “New Political Divide: Farewell, left versus right. The contest that matters now is open against closed.” Again, the Sanders phenomenon and the Trump phenomenon are put together because they both would pursue goals of restriction for free markets and for the free movement of people. “America is not alone. Across Europe, the politicians with momentum are those who argue that the world is a nasty, threatening place, and that wise nations should build walls to keep it out.”⁸

However, even political and social scientists have struggled to escape a fascination with easy generalizations and monocausal explanations, although within high quality research. In *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit and Authoritarian Populism*, a book published in 2019 that has been highly successful, Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart draw on statistical data and a broad range of literature to make the case for patterns of voting for populist parties across Europe, in the UK with Brexit, and Donald Trump in the USA.⁹ *Cultural Backlash* is a substantial book, drawing on a wide, heavily-cited body of literature to build its argument in a clear sequence towards a general conclusion that patterns of voting for populist parties across Europe, for Brexit in the UK and for Trump in the USA, all show substantial intergenerational differences. The greatest support for populist-authoritarians comes, in the authors’ view, from the older generations, which are declining in size, both relatively and absolutely, while set against their younger contemporaries who are more likely to favor post-material values and their related politics.

However, as the late Ron Johnston and other authors have pointed out, some of the statistical inferences in the book did not stand up to careful analysis, especially those that were supposed to bring water to the mill of the book’s thesis. The conflict between cosmopolitanism and authoritarian populism would be essentially traceable to a cultural and generational clash between members of four types of generations (mainly European, plus the United States): Interwar (those born between 1900 and 1945); Boomers (1946–64); Generation X (1965–79); and Millennials (1980–96).

Johnston’s analysis is gently relentless. “Their chosen approach to establishing whether the cultural backlash theory works uses multiple regressions in which the first model includes just the four generations, which prove statistically significant—again unsurprising given the large samples—but the r^2 values are mostly very low (less than 0.05 in many cases; in one place a correlation of 0.074 is termed “moderately strong”). Further models add extra variables representing class, education, religion, populist and authoritarian values, among others. As these are added, so the size and statistical significance of the generational variables declines, reflecting collinearity among the independent variables that is only weakly recognized: Generation X individuals are more likely to have degrees than those in the Interwar generation, for example.”¹⁰

The impressive work of Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart could miss the point of explaining worldwide populism, even in the country on which the authors focus the most, namely, the United States. And it is precisely here that social and political scientists, much more modest in their ambitions and ability to generalize, should ask themselves if it is not convenient to work more carefully on a limited number of cases and actors, with an approach capable of giving historical depth to the social and political phenomena of the present.

3 Conclusions. For A Unified Agenda on the Crisis of Democracy

History should help political and social scientists to understand what familiar or unfamiliar elements of the past illuminate the present. Instead, historians will be surprised, perhaps, to learn that several

8. See “The New Political Divide: Farewell, Left Versus Right. The Contest That Matters Now is Open Against Closed,” *The Economist*, July 30, 2016, <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2016/07/30/the-new-political-divide>.

9. Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit and Authoritarian Populism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

10. See Ron Johnston, “Book Review: Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit and Authoritarian Populism by Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart,” *LSE Review of Books*, June 5, 2019, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsereviewofbooks/2019/06/05/book-review-cultural-backlash-trump-brexit-and-authoritarian-populism-by-pippa-norris-and-ronald-inglehart/>.

studies on populism, including the American case, fail to cite a seminal text like Michael Kazin's *The Populist Persuasion*,¹¹ although it was updated and republished in 2017. The risk is one that the social sciences have always run when making generalizations about phenomena that come from afar. Like treating the case of Trumpian American populism, precisely, as a simple derivative of the global phenomenon of the revolt against globalization, a point of view that may have very good reasons, based on satisfactory empirical analysis. There is the risk, however, of losing 120 years of American populist history and a full understanding of the phenomenon.

Not by chance, it was Michael Kazin himself who intervened to ask how it was possible to equate Bernie Sanders with Donald Trump, since both are populists:

Yet differences of language matter; they suggest what a candidate will seek to accomplish if he or she takes power. The nineteenth-century antecedent that Trump evokes in his nativist appeals to white working and middle-class Americans is not the populism of the People's Party but rather that of the Know-Nothing Party of the 1850s, which similarly argued that immigrants were taking Americans' jobs and breaking the nation's laws. Trump's "populism" is a brilliant specimen of performance art but one that bears little resemblance, even in style, to the capital-P kind. The earnest activists from the People's Party of old brandished a lengthy blueprint for reform; Trump's personality overshadows his program. His canny lack of finesse finesses us all.

And he reminds us to look at the emergence of an "anti-system" protest as proof of the crisis of the American democratic system: "But every major 'populist' insurgency is a warning about serious problems festering in our politics. To simply blame the messenger is an exercise in denial."¹²

The invitation to pay attention to the historical origins of the phenomena to which Kazin refers should not discourage us, however, from rigorously researching the topics on which to build comparative analyses of the democratic crisis, always considering a full historical knowledge of the case we are dealing with. We already have an enormous amount of empirical research on all this, and it is hard to keep up with everything that academic journals publish.

It is worth investigating rigorously, for example, the origins and perspectives of extreme and populist right-wingers in Europe and the United States, keeping well in mind the peculiar origins of the American extreme right, which does not possess the heavy European past. Obviously there are already those who do this in an excellent way, but what should not be forgotten is the weight of the difference between systems and political cultures. Likewise, it is worth investigating the forms of dialogue and mutual influence between the right-wingers on both sides of the Atlantic. The Atlantic dialogue is continuous, it applies to right-wingers today as it did to the Third Way leftists of the 1990s. But then we must always keep in mind how profoundly different Donald Trump's nativism is from Eric Zemmour's, even if their public speeches have several points of contact.

Just as interesting is uncovering the common agenda among groups supporting, on both sides of the Atlantic, climate denialism, pandemic denialism, and conspiracy theories. And the same may be true of movements against the climate crisis, for example. For each of these fields of study, already crowded with scholars and experts, what I said before still applies: we are certain, for example, that no one should study American conspiracy theories in the same way as one treats European conspiracy theories. Trivial? Less than it seems.

Similarly, it is worth investigating from an empirical point of view what Paolo Gerbaudo has called The Great Recoil, or "the return of the state." Gerbaudo states that neoliberalism, the ideology that presided over decades of market globalisation, is on trial, while state intervention is making a spectacular comeback amid lockdowns, mass vaccination programs, deficit spending and climate planning.¹³ Is this true? Is it only partially true? Is it an optical illusion caused by the pandemic crisis? And what

11. Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017).

12. See "How Can Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders Both Be 'Populist'?" *The New York Times Magazine*, March 27, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/27/magazine/how-can-donald-trump-and-bernie-sanders-both-be-populist.html>.

13. Paolo Gerbaudo, *The Great Recoil: Politics After Populism and Pandemic* (London: Verso Books, 2021).

does it mean in terms of policies, if we look at the American federal system today, compared to the multi-level governance model of European countries?

These few pages, in short, are just a modest invitation to keep history as a working horizon for social and political scientists, especially here in Europe. Political scientists who want to investigate the democratic crisis of this decade, after all, should just remember the incipit of one of their wise colleagues, namely, Alfio Mastropaolo. Mastropaolo writes in the volume *Is Democracy a Lost Cause? Paradoxes of an Imperfect Invention*,

it is an oft-forgotten fact, but democracy is a human invention and therefore a historical fact. It claims to be the supreme good, but it is not. Neither is it the fate of the human race, or even a necessity. It originated somewhere, from where it is spread widely, changing and adapting, and it is destined to have an end. As with all historical facts, its birth, success and misfortunes are characterized by a broad margin of uncertainty.¹⁴

14. Alfio Mastropaolo, *Is Democracy a Lost Cause?* (Colchester: ECPR Press, 2012), 9.