

The PSI and the crisis of party democracy. Transformation, deideologization and delegitimation with the Italian socialists, 1978-1992

“Layers and Connections of the Political”
International APH conference 2020-2021
14-25 June 2021

Author: Pepijn Corduwener
Utrecht University, The Netherlands

Abstract

Arguably more than any other party, the PSI and its leader Bettino Craxi are identified with the corruption and clientelism that were a major factor in the deep crisis of party democracy in the early 1990s. This paper, however, shifts the attention away from corruption to the internal transformation of the PSI during the 1980s in order to explore how the party's development contributed to the crisis of party democracy. The paper investigates how the PSI re-invented itself in three ways since the late-1970s. First, ideologically, the party made a definite rupture with its Marxist ideological traditions, embracing free market capitalism and representative democracy. Second, representationally, it moved from the representation of pre-existing societal cleavages to 'statal' representation, identifying with the interests, and, to a lesser extent, institutions of the state in times of a widely-felt democratic and economic crisis. Third, organizationally, it transformed into a 'lighter' and more personalized movement, in which the emphasis was no longer on acting as a social-integrative force, but on its function as a governing party. Whereas these changes largely coincided with an unprecedented socialist ascent to power, they ultimately contributed to the decline of the party and Italy's party system at large. The party's triple transformation encouraged its entanglement with the state and its alienation from society; while its claim to reform ailing democratic institutions not only failed to materialise, but also further delegitimized existing representative institutions - including that of the party itself. The paper concludes by exploring until what extent the case of the PSI might epitomize the fate of other traditional parties in Europe.

Author information

Pepijn Corduwener is an Assistant Professor at the Department of History, Utrecht University. He is interested in the history and present politics of democracy in Western Europe and currently works on a comparative research project on the demise of traditional parties, funded by the Netherlands Organization of Scientific Research. His recent publications include *The Problem of Democracy in Postwar Europe* (Routledge 2017); *1989 and the West. Western Europe since the End of the Cold War* (co-edited with Eleni Braat, Routledge 2019); and the articles 'Democracy and the Entanglement of Political Parties and the State. Party-state relations in 20th-century France, Germany and Italy', *Comparative Political Studies* (2019) and 'Challenging Parties and Anti-fascism in the Name of Democracy. The Fronte dell'Uomo Qualunque and its Impact on Italy's Republic', *Contemporary European History* (2017).

Contact Information

p.corduwener@uu.nl

Friday, 18 June - Session 6 - **9,00-10,30 CET (Webex)** - Panel – *Delegitimizing party democracy: Italy as exception or harbinger of change in European democracies (1978-1994)?*

Luiss
School of Government

Via di Villa Emiliani, 14
00197 Roma
T +39 06 85225052
sog@luiss.it