



## Handing over the Torch in Political Science: Legacies of Past and Present Themes in the Italian Research Agenda

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### BOOKS REVIEWED

Berton, Fabio, Richiardi, Matteo, and Sacchi, Stefano (2009). *Flex-Insecurity: Perché in Italia la flessibilità diventa precarietà* [Flex Insecurity: Why Flexibility becomes precariousness in Italy]. Bologna: Il Mulino.

Cesa, Marco (2007). *Alleati ma non rivali* [Allies but not Rivals]. Bologna: Il Mulino.

Chiaromonte, Alessandro (2005). *Tra maggioritario e proporzionale: L'universo dei sistemi elettorali misti* [Between Majoritarian and Proportional; The Universe of the Mixed Electoral System]. Bologna: Il Mulino.

Della Porta, Donatella and Caiani, Manuela (2006). *Quale Europa? Europeizzazione, identità e conflitti* [Which Europe? Europeanization, identity and conflict]. Bologna: Il Mulino.

Fargion, Valeria, Morlino, Leonardo, and Profeti, Stefania (2006). *Europeizzazione e rappresentanza territoriale: il caso italiano* [Europeanization and territorial representation: the Italian case]. Bologna: Il Mulino.

Jessoula, Matteo (2009). *La politica pensionistica* [Pension policy]. Bologna: Il Mulino.

Mulé, Rosa (2006). *Dentro ai DS* [Inside the DS]. Bologna: Il Mulino.

Panebianco, Angelo (2009). *L'automa e lo spirito: Chi decide in politica* [The Robot and the Spirit: who Decides in Politics]. Bologna: Il Mulino.

Parsi, Vittorio Emanuele (2006). *L'alleanza inevitabile* [The Inevitable Alliance]. Milan: Bocconi.

Pederzoli, Patrizia (2008). *La corte costituzionale* [The Constitutional Court]. Bologna: Il Mulino.

Pizzorno, Alessandro (2007). *Il velo della diversità* [The Veil of Diversity]. Milan: Cortina.

## Crafting the State

Public policy analysis has become a pivotal component of the domestic scientific debate (Ferrera, 1992). Among the several volumes published between 2006 and 2009 two touch directly upon major issues for the international debates too: Matteo Jessoula, *La politica pensionistica* and Fabio Berton, Matteo Richiardi, and Stefano Sacchi, *Flex-Insecurity: Perché in Italia la flessibilità diventa precarietà*, both published by Il Mulino in 2009. Matteo Jessoula addresses the historical developments and transformations that took place in the 20th century in the pension sector. In Europe models initially based on one pillar pension scheme (public) were incrementally transformed and hybridized under the effects of exogenous forces – such as the decrease in the economic development rate and the increase in the average age of the employed population – but also, as in the case of Italy, under the effect of endogenous processes of change that affected the dynamic between the left and right wings in the political arenas. The incorporation of non-public actors as subsidiary providers of social services for elderly people has accompanied a radical reconfiguration of the pension systems (“fondi pensione”). The first part of the volume reconstructs the pressure exerted by the process of economic and monetary integration that took place in the European Union, as national governments were forced to compromise between domestic entitlement legacies and the new constraints placed by the Maastricht Treaty on public expenditure. As the overall outcome of the manifold processes of change, European pension systems now exhibit a multi-pillar aspect in which private and public actors co-exist (pp. 82–3). The detailed background provided by the author proves very helpful in casting brighter and clearer light on the Italian case, and enables us to see with different eyes the path followed by the Italian pension system in the course of the 20th century and the effects brought about by recent reforms (1992–2006). Whereas Jessoula addresses mainly the evolution of the Italian

pension system and reframes the domestic debate on pension schemes – one of the hottest issues on the agenda of recent governments – *Flex-Insecurity* assesses the Italian labor market against the background of the international debate on flex-security strategies. Flex-security has been defended by international organizations (especially the OCSE) and European institutions as a promising solution that accommodates the need to support the pace of modern economic development by creating a more flexible labor market, as well as the need to provide employees with guarantees of social security. Internationally, the debate has grown more heated in the last two decades and incorporates new political and technical reflections on the sustainability of the minimum wage. The volume by Berton, Richiardi, and Sacchi touches upon these delicate issues, starting from the experience of Italy, and rephrases innovatively the main terms of the debate. In laying out their analytical framework, the authors introduce key distinctions between the concept of a “non-standard,” or “atypical,” worker (*lavoratore atipico*), which properly refers to a legal status related to the type of contract the worker is hired on, and a different definition used more or less properly in the scientific and political debates as a synonym, that is, the “insecure” or “precarious” worker (*precario*). According to the authors, the atypical status of the worker stands among other factors that may – depending on how they interact with each other and with the external institutional environment – be responsible for the conditions of precariousness confronted by workers. Precariousness (p. 23) is the *outcome of an open and not predetermined process*. As the simple legal status of “atypical worker” does not in itself explain the existence, the magnitude, and the critical aspects of the precariousness, all systems whose strategies and institutions address, more or less directly, the position of an employed person should be taken into consideration. This methodology allows the authors to displace the relationship between flexibility and precariousness from the level of general and a-priori assumptions to the level of empirically based conclusions. The main thesis of the volume is that flexible positions in the labor market are not by their very nature intrinsically associated with conditions of precariousness and weakness. If this is the case, then the responsibility of policy-makers is even higher than might be expected from the current debate in the domestic public discourse. Flexibility produces precariousness only if other conditions are fulfilled, in particular when social security schemes and legal provisions that regulate the access to and exit from temporary employment positions produce, as an aggregate effect, an unstable set of opportunities and high costs for employees confronted by employees seeking to reallocate their competence and skills in the labor market. Exploring this idea, the authors offer a thorough deconstruction of the other institutional tools of the welfare state, touching upon pension schemes and social security instruments in the Italian model of welfare (as it looks nowadays after decades of reforms and radical transformations).

The analytical richness and the innovative character of the framework consist in unpacking the commonly mixed up triad composed of the concepts of “atypical” status, precariousness, and “flexibility.” As the authors note, policies matter in this respect, as they predetermine how the first and the third factor (atypical status and flexibility), combined together, may end up, under certain circumstances, in precariousness. They then offer an empirical assessment of the policies that enter into the broad analytical picture depicted in the previous chapters: rates of pay,

minimum wage, public unemployment insurance, and social security instruments. The case of Italy proves extremely interesting for the international debate as well, inasmuch as it represents an experiment *in vitro* of a radical change of labor policies starting in the 1980s. The economic crises and the neoliberal stream eroded the guarantees offered to the employed and the potential unemployed and opened a policy window for a more aggressive, liberalized, and flexible labor market. The process of change dismantled, at least formally, some obstacles that employers had confronted for decades when they wanted to dismiss employees. However, at the same time new legal types of contract of employment appeared in domestic labor law without being associated with adequate and forward-looking instruments of social protection.

The analysis of the aggregate effect emerging from these processes of change shows that at the present time the Italian labor market exhibits a high degree of precariousness of workers not merely because of the increase in the flexibility or the number of atypical contractual relationships found in the market, but rather because of the interplay between labor market and social security institutions. The authors have successfully addressed a highly technical topic using the instruments of both political economy and political science, based on the deductive approach adopted in the first three chapters (devoted to disentangling the conceptual relationship flexibility/precariousness) and the inductive approach applied to the analysis of the Italian labor market. In this respect their volume is an interdisciplinary contribution that stands at the moment fairly alone and as an *unicum* in the spectrum of Italian policy studies.

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### Biographical Note

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