

Southern European Exceptionalism: different sides of the debate

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1. Exceptionalism: Another Orientalism?

Considering a complex theme like southern European exceptionalism raises at least three questions. The first is that of the legitimacy of the concept of exceptionalism. The second is whether we can consider legitimate the category of Southern Europe. The third, which follows on from the first two, is that of the legitimacy of the concept of exceptionalism applied to southern Europe.

What does exceptionalism mean? Obviously, for something to be 'exceptional', this must be in relation to some norm or rule. Within this logic, there are situations which correspond to a rule and situations which do not. Of course, the 'exceptionalism' of a situation depends entirely on who defines 'the rule' – for democratic Europe, Fascism was an exception and a blight. For Fascism, the exception and the blight was democratic Europe.

Another problem is that of establishing what the 'rule' is based on. One of the most obvious criteria is that of frequency. Another often used to define the rule in human behaviour, especially in Catholic countries, is that of 'nature'. For example, one type of union is claimed to be more 'natural' than another. The difficulty lies in establishing with certainty what is natural and what is not, with the latter then being 'exceptional'. Of course, to claim that something in the political world is 'unnatural' would be ridiculous and so other yardsticks are used such as tradition, modernity, and justice. However, these are again clearly arbitrary measurements.

As a result, once we begin using the concept of 'exceptionalism', we know more or less where to begin, but have no idea where we will finish. It is sufficient to take a quick look at the politics shelves in a library to see that the situations defined as 'exceptional' in the world are far more numerous than those which follow 'the rule' and that politics seems to consist of non-conformity to the rules and hence 'exceptional' situations. We can find numerous examples of this, from Lipset's final book on 'American Exceptionalism' to a vast array of works on British exceptionalism, French exceptionalism, German exceptionalism, Scandinavian exceptionalism, Swiss exceptionalism, Australian exceptionalism, Japanese exceptionalism, Italian exceptionalism, Israeli exceptionalism, Belgian exceptionalism and so on. Given this, does it really make sense to go in search of southern European exceptionalism?

That aside, the notion of southern European exceptionalism is a long recurring one and hence needs to be taken seriously. However, maybe the best way to take it seriously is to question it by asking whether the exceptionalism attributed to southern Europe (which of course within it contains a whole series of other 'exceptionalisms' such as those of the South of Italy and Spain compared to their respective Norths) is not perhaps similar in many respects to Edward Said's 'Orientalism'?

As is well known, the concept of orientalism denotes the centuries-old propensity of western observers of the Orient to consider this a single, compact and coherent unit which is radically different from the West. Separateness and opposition are therefore the two sides of orientalism, which juxtaposes an 'Us' – the familiar and 'normal' West – with an orient which is very different, distant and prey to various pathologies.

As Said explained in depth, orientalism is an intellectual construct, but it is also full of political implications. In fact, it is not simply a mono-directional construct. It

contains a representation of the West which is symmetrical to that of the Orient: the Orientalists are at the same time Occidentalists. Or, to be more precise, they have constructed an idea of the West which also reflects a certain conception of the East, which was designed for this very purpose.

Another element to this discussion is the orientalism of those from the Orient. These have often assimilated the Us/Them discourse by worrying only how to reverse it. In other words, they have either developed an idea of themselves which is complementary to that of Westerners or they have recognised their 'deviancy' and sought to eliminate it. This implies finally that those in the East have in turn constructed an idea of the West which is obviously symmetrical to their idea of the East.¹

We can apply a similar logic to the question of the exceptionalism of southern Europe. There is a notion of southern exceptionalism in central and northern Europe which is interlinked with an idea of central and northern European 'normality'. There is also a sense of exceptionalism shared by those in the South, who in turn have developed their own idea of central and northern normality.

It might be interesting to examine the similarities and differences between these the two ideas of normality and exceptionalism. For example, is what is 'normal' for a southern European also normal for one from the North? And do they agree on what represents an exception? And are exceptions always considered pejoratively and norms always positively? For the Grand Tour travellers, the exceptionalism of the south, with its elements of exoticism, had many valuable aspects. For a protestant, the domination of the Papacy in Italy was (and perhaps still is) a very negative element, as it is also considered by many Italian Catholics and non-believers. The late industrialisation of Italy seemed to many observers in the 1950s as a significant plus, which allowed better regulation of the market economy than had occurred in northern Europe. Similarly, many in northern Europe saw the benefits of the protective network provided by southern families. Likewise, it would be hard to consider the conditions in the French banlieues 'normal'. All of this is to say that the concept of 'exceptionalism' does not help us to understand the world any more than Orientalism. It is little more than a prejudice which does next to nothing to enable us to explain and comprehend the phenomena which it claims to describe.

2. Does Southern Europe exist?

The concept of southern Europe also raises a number of intriguing questions. Does there really exist a space which we can define in this unitary way? What common features does it have? Since the 'old' Europe of the six founding members of the EC began to enlarge, and particularly since the recent accessions to the East, there have been various attempts to divide Europe up into simplistic categories. Thus, when the EU enlarged to the North, this was contrasted with an idea of a Southern Europe – a notion that was reinforced with the opening up to the East and the difficulties in the political situation along the shores of the Mediterranean. This in turn influenced policy by the EU itself. Indeed, it would be interesting to reconstruct this history using the official documents of the EU. If I

¹ See J. Carrier, "Occidentalism: The World Turned Upside-down" *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (May, 1992), pp. 195-212

remember correctly, when there was just the old EC, made up of the six member states, the concept of southern Europe was little used. Of course, there was an idea of an area, with a beautiful sea and lots of sunshine, but this also included Southern France, where the richer classes of the North liked to winter. The prevailing perception of the whole of the South of Europe derived from the attraction it exerted on the North. It was a piece of Europe, no more, no less.

On this point, it is interesting to note that in 1975, a geography book on Southern Europe did not just include the South of France, but in addition to France, Italy, Spain, Portugal and Greece, also encompassed Switzerland, Liechtenstein, Yugoslavia and Albania.² This is roughly the same space identified by Newbigin in his 1932 geography text.³

To be sure, there are clear similarities between Mediterranean cities such as Barcelona, Marseilles, Genoa, Naples and Athens. But how, for example, can one consider 'southern' a region like Galicia which, linguistically and culturally, is more part of the Celtic fringe? Or what 'southern' characteristics do regions with long industrial histories such as Lombardy and Catalonia have?

If we are to be rigorous, we have to say that Southern Europe as a single, homogenous category does not exist. It is not a unitary space from a geographical point of view, given that there is not even a territorial continuity. It is not unitary from a religious perspective or a cultural one. In economic terms, it is an exceedingly variegated space, with agricultural and industrial areas which are each incredibly diverse from one region and country to another.

In other words, 'Southern Europe' is a simplification. If on a map it is easy enough to identify a South, a North, a West and an East, the history of southern Europe has created many heterogeneous realities, just as the history of the rest of the continent has done.

3. The supposed exceptionalism of Southern Europe

Put very simply, exceptionalism is a prejudice. One can try to dress it up with scientific qualities, but it remains a prejudice. Southern Europe is a space like any other on the map. Nobody ever talks about Atlantic Europe, putting together the countries of the Gulf Stream and claiming that they have something important in common. Yet, many respectable scholars have done so in the case of southern Europe. Indeed, in political science, this area has given rise to new journals over the last decade or so such as 'Southern European Society and Politics' and 'Southern Europe and the Balkans Review'.

For political scientists, the combination for comparative purposes of Portugal, Spain, Italy and Greece is quickly done. It is enough simply to note that all four countries were until recently 'peripheral' and 'backward', that their institutions were constructed

² M. and R. Beckinsale, *Southern Europe: the Mediterranean and Alpine lands*, University of London Press, London, 1975.

³ M. I. Newbigin, *Southern Europe, a regional and economic geography of the mediterranean lands (Italy, Spain, Portugal, Greece, Albania and Switzerland)*, London, Methuen & co., 1932.

late and weakly, that the spread of the market economy was difficult, that the fabric of society has remained largely unchanged, that industrialisation occurred late, that clientilism has been a significant element in political life and that these countries shared an experience of right-wing dictatorship. In this way a double identity and dichotomy is created with tradition on one side and modernity on the other.

In reality, just as the dichotomy created between North and South is brutal, by the same token the grouping together of the four 'southern' countries is unacceptably hasty. For example, the Portuguese state is as old as the British one. The Spanish bureaucracy can not have been so incapable if it was capable of sustaining an empire for almost two centuries. If we look at these countries as parliamentary democracies, Italy has had one for sixty years which has certainly been more stable than that in France where, until 1958, the representative structures of the country led a difficult existence. Germany had a quite particular representative regime. At best, we can consider that of Imperial Germany as a semi-parliamentary regime, if not semi-authoritarian. In any case, it was certainly very different from those elsewhere in Europe. In Italy, by contrast, the parliamentary regime lasted and governed a complex process of unification. Moreover, this experience has little in common with those of the other three southern countries, where the problems of liberal-representative regimes in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, until the last third of the latter, were far greater and more dramatic than those in Italy.

As regards Fascism, this was an Italian invention, exported to Germany (and with many relatives in France), but which had little in common with the military coup conducted by General Franco and with the military dictatorship which followed. Fascism has even less in common with the Metaxas dictatorship and the regime of the colonels in Greece or with the Salazar regime in Portugal. There is not even a similar experience of civil war in the four countries. In Portugal there was no civil war, while Spain and Greece suffered two devastating and terrible civil wars, albeit at different times and in different circumstances. Italy rather had a bloody resistance and liberation struggle – which some like to define a 'civil' war on the grounds that there were Italians on both sides, but this is a distortion of the truth. If it was a civil war, it was no more so than the anti-Nazi liberation movement in France during the occupation. Finally, if in seeking points of contact between the four countries, we wish to emphasize the question of clientilism, then we must note that clientilism is a very fluid concept and forms of it, perhaps in different guises and with different names, can also be seen in the so-called advanced democracies.

In sum, if there are similarities, then they are very superficial.⁴ They are not insignificant, however it is true that if we look closely, all countries resemble each other in some shape or form, and it would not be too difficult to substitute the similarities found between these four countries with ways in which each resembles countries outside this group. Italian history can be easily compared with that of France or Germany. This is what Giovanni Sartori did to support his concept of 'polarized pluralism'. Unfortunately Italian history did not confirm his theory, that polarized pluralism was inefficient and destined to break up. First of all, Italian polarized pluralism proved to be very efficient indeed. What had been an agricultural country – which had just suffered a terrible

⁴ Even political scientists are in doubt about who to include in Southern Europe, as can be seen by the inclusion of France in P. Ignazi, C. Ysmal (eds.), *The Organization of Political Parties in Southern Europe*, Westport, Praeger, 1998.

military defeat – became in a short period of time a major industrial power. Secondly, if Italian polarized pluralism went into crisis in the early 1990s, this was more because of centripetal forces than its internal lacerations. That these deep lacerations reappeared, and dramatically so, in Italy from the 1990s onwards, is quite a singular and problematic aspect, but one which was desired and called for – also by changing the rules of the game – by a significant part of the Italian political world and the intelligentsia which, having decided that Italian democracy was an exception, sought doggedly to render it ‘normal’, only to eventually reach the same outcome as before: a democracy which is normal in one way, but inefficient in another.

The argument put forward by these actors was that the situation of Italian democracy by the end of the 1980s – unstable, inefficient and corrupt – could not go on. And so it had to be reformed, by giving it a bipolar structure. This of course has a clear appeal: the idea of reducing a political culture and the problems of the political system to just two colours is an attractive one. The idea that one group governs and the other monitors and prepares to replace them is simplistic, but persuasive. As too is the notion of rational voters who observe, keep themselves informed, and choose rationally, rewarding and punishing accordingly. Unfortunately, this idea which works well in theory is far more complex in practice and only behaves as it should exceptionally and partially: the *reductio ad duem* is a straitjacket which can only be used in particular circumstances; the voters are not at all well-informed or rational and the choices they make are the product of their environments and cognitive maps which are strongly rooted over generations. As such, they are highly resistant to change.

Thus it happened that bipolarism arose in a short space of time in Italy and, with it, the stability of governments increased and, finally, the sovereign people was able to decide who should govern it. And yet nobody could honestly claim today that this result has been a satisfactory one. Certainly it is has not produced a particularly virtuous or efficient democracy, although there are few cases elsewhere about which we could say this either. If we look at GDP statistics, we find that Spain is doing much better, but its economy was far less mature. By contrast, France and Germany are in a similar position to Italy: perhaps a little better, but not by much. Moreover, there is little evidence that the problem of corruption, which plagued First Republic Italy, has improved. Just as there is little evidence that other countries are particularly better off in this respect.

It is also worth noting that this sub-division between ‘normal’ and ‘exceptional’ democracies, and hence the ‘exceptionalist’ prejudice, is a relatively recent invention. If we look, for example, at a classic comparative politics work such as Lord Bryce’s *Modern Democracies*, we cannot find any trace of ‘exceptional’ and ‘normal’ democracies, but simply of ‘different’ democracies. The ‘exceptionality’ prejudice developed only after the Second World War, when various democracies – which the war had given an unchallengeable badge of virtuousness – were forced to consider and respond to the weaknesses of others. Following the restoration of democracy in Italy and Germany (and also in France), it was obviously that the virtuous and victorious democracies would hope that the restored ones would be stable and vibrant, just as they believed themselves to be. From this, they constructed the exceptionality prejudice, accompanied and fuelled by the belief that various fundamental characteristics of their democracies should be spread to the restored democracies. The success of the exceptionality prejudice also goes hand-in-hand with another prejudice that mythologizes

the democracies of the English-speaking world and derides other democratic regimes. And in this conviction, political science has also played a fundamental role.

To come back to the discussion in particular of 'southern European' democracies, let us look at the case of Spain. The return to democracy in that country occurred in a context which was radically different from that in which democracy was restored in Italy. The Cold War was no longer at its height and, in its final years, the Franco regime had lost some of its rougher edges. Development had begun and it was known that this would continue. It was also known that Spain would have the possibility of participating in European integration. By contrast, in Italy nothing was certain and the parties which emerged at the end of the war had entirely different international loyalties. Soviet communism was still a realistic prospect - a situation which was no longer the case when Santiago Carrillo would return to Spain and have as his international reference points not Moscow, but the Euro-communism of Berlinguer and Marchais. Just as when the Spanish Constitution was drafted, they were able to consult legal experts from Italy for guidance. Indeed, Italy seemed like a good model to imitate. Moreover, when it came to applying the Constitution in Spain, the political world was able to consult a far wider array of experts, including a category which did not exist in Italy in 1948: the political scientists, who in Spain were mostly young scholars who had lived abroad and had studied and worked in the universities of the English-speaking world. Hence, while the Spanish Constitution may resemble the Italian one, its interpretation is far more Anglo-Saxon.

Looking more closely, we can see that the 'exceptionalism' of Spanish, Portuguese and Greek democracies seems to lie mostly in the fact that previously they were dictatorships, following which adversarial democracies were created. In Italy, the situation was very different: bipolarism was grafted onto a democracy which had already been up and running for four decades. Hence, it was not a case of establishing a new democratic practice where there had not been democracy, but of replacing an old one which was well-consolidated, albeit with various problems.

4. Conclusion

When in the nineteenth century, representative democracy became a must, when it was in the interests of various actors to import it, France took it on board differently from Germany and Italy. Indeed, there were debates on how to embrace representative democracy given that different ways of doing so benefited different actors. There was little thought given to 'exceptions' and 'rules', also because what constituted 'the rule' was extremely vague. In fact, in nineteenth century Italy, there were those who interpreted representative democracy in the French way, those who did so in the English sense, just as there were those who looked to American and Swiss federalism, and those who saw many merits in the German Reich under Bismarck. There were also those such as Gaetano Mosca, who claimed that representative democracy was a calamity and that democracy was a hoax with just one exception - Britain, where democracy had been lucky enough to find itself in the capable hands of a political class drawn from the aristocracy and which was therefore not particularly democratic.

In other words, in each national context - which is itself made up of a series of contexts, of different territorial realities, social strata, interests, heterogeneous communities, which have to find a *modus vivendi* - the representative democracy regime

has taken on a specific form which works in its own particular way and fulfils different functions. Certainly, political science is quick to turn up its nose and administer slaps on the wrist. Political Science of American origin seeks to be taken seriously as a 'science' and stipulates general laws. Moreover, in Europe, we have this idea that we must converge. And to do so, the good pupils have to help the weak ones. The problem however is that in the real world, things do not necessarily work as perfectly as they do in theory, and political actors make use in their own ways of the systems in which they find themselves. Rules are important, but they can be interpreted by creative and intelligent actors. Berlusconi is a case in point. As also is Sarkozy.

A final point I wish to raise regards an 'exceptional' feature of the Italian parliament at the moment. The prevailing notion in Italy, and abroad, is that the Italian political class is firmly embedded and highly resistant to change and renewal. Yet, if we look at the average age of deputies, we find that the Italian parliament is the youngest among large European countries and is the one in which there is the highest turnover. Naturally, some will say therefore that, finally, in Italy something positive is taking place. In reality, however, despite the fact that over the last fifteen years, since Italy achieved the bipolar dream, there has been alternation in power four times and we are about to have a fifth, the Italian governing class is one of the least popular on the planet. Moreover, it seeks to hide and reinforce its immovability by co-opting into parliament a series of young people, lacking experience. Is this pathological or physiological? Probably it is simply one of the thousands of exceptions which make up true normality – a normality which may not be that of political scientists, but rather that familiar to anthropologists.