Le virtù del clientelismo

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Le virtù del clientelismo. Una critica non convenzionale, by Simona Piattoni

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symbolic and communicative kind of agency through which people express their world-
views, identities and opinions.

The book offers in-depth information regarding a social phenomenon that is becoming
particularly significant in a time when ‘consumer societies’ increasingly tend to concentrate
on private interests and individual welfare (p. 171): in driving citizens to reflect in
alternative ways over their daily consumption habits, the ‘critical approach’ to consump-
tion uncovers how much of this is built upon economic and political relations which are
unfair, asymmetric, grubby (p. 113). From a scientific point of view, the book has the merit
of avoiding ideological and ‘prepacked’ views on the phenomenon which is rather
investigated ‘bottom-up’, allowing ‘the emergence from the same consumers’ narrations
of the different nuances of meaning looming in the archipelago of critical consumption’
(p. 15). Critical consumers appear to be moved not only by altruistic feelings, but by a
mix of diverse motivations: ethical and aestetical, pragmatic and idealistic, individual and
solidaristic, global and local, concerning the environment as well as personal health. The
extensive citations quoted from the interviews add freshness to the text, making it
enjoyable also for the non-academic reader.

If a limit of the book can be found, it is that there is little integration of the in-depth
qualitative empirical research with quantitative data: we read that critical consumption is
growing in Italy and is still marginal in the south of the country, but figures offered in the
preface afterwards are partial and in integrated the analysis. If, as stated, consumers’
behaviour is influenced not only by their cultural and political background, but also by the
different social contexts in which consumption takes place (p. 172), it would have been
interesting also to identify – at both the national and sub-national level – the specific socio-
economic features of the areas considered by the research.

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**Le virtu del clientelismo. Una critica non convenzionale**, by Simona Piattoni, Rome-Bari,

Over the course of the last two decades, social and political scientists have paid increasing
attention to the study of corruption. Some studies have developed taxonomies and
categorisations of various types and modes of corruption and improper conduct; others
have focused on the conditions that favour the emergence of corruption and other types
of improper conduct; while a third set of studies discussed the consequences of corruption
and the other forms of misconduct.

This third group of studies have generally emphasised that corruption and other forms
of misconduct are ‘bad’ not only from a normative point of view, but also from a positive
point of view. Corruption and other forms of misconduct are believed to undermine the
fabric of societies, to erode the quality of democracy, to prevent its consolidation in newly
democratised polities, and, last but not least, to prevent socioeconomic development. The
conclusion that corruption has a detrimental impact on socioeconomic development was
particularly important because it led a paradigm shift within international organisations
devoted to promoting development: anti-corruption activities are now viewed as an
integral part of any credible effort to promote socioeconomic development and to
eradicate poverty. In contrast to what a large body of research has been arguing for well
over a decade, Piattoni suggests that under some specific circumstances, some types of
misconduct or clientelism may have beneficial consequences – in terms of the distribution
of public goods, of economic development and growing legitimacy.

In the book, Piattoni laments that most of the debate on corruption has a moralistic
tone rather than a scientific one, that corruption should not be viewed exclusively as the
result of the moral and anthropological characteristics of a society and its citizens,
and that both cultural and structural explanations tend to explain too much to be good
scientific explanations. For Piattoni, the explanation for clientelism and other forms
of misconduct is to be found in the system of incentives provided by the institutional
arrangement, which, in its turn, is a consequence of what is technically called ‘political
development’ or ‘institutionalisation’.

Piattoni defines what clientelism is and is not, by comparing and contrasting it
with other forms of (mis)conduct: trasformismo or party-switching, consociativismo or log-
rolling, corruzione or corruption and conflitto di interessi or conflict of interests. She goes
on to present, in the second chapter, a typology of clientelism, and to claim that under
some circumstances clientelism may be beneficial. Piattoni then investigates, in compar-
ative perspective, the development of the Italian political system which is responsible
for a system of incentives that favours clientelism and other forms of misconduct and
suggests the conditions under which such system of incentives could be reformed.
The book could be of interest for those Italian readers who want to develop a more
analytical understanding of why clientelism features so prominently in the Italian political
system; for Italian politics specialists who may gain new insights into what is, from
Banfield onward, a well-known but not always adequately understood phenomenon; and
for all those scholars and practitioners working on development.

While the book has many merits and virtues, it leaves the reader wanting more. Let me
highlight two topics that deserved a more detailed discussion: first, the relationship
between clientelism and what Mosca and Pareto defined as the circulation of elites
and, second, the virtues of clientelism. Let me address the first issue initially. Piattoni,
at various points in her analysis (pp. 7, 59–60, 64), posits that that these two phenomena
are related to each other, but does not make entirely clear what is cause and what is effect
in such a relationship. In fact, while on page 7 Piattoni suggests that clientelism is the
cause of non-circulation of the (political) elites, later on she seems to regard it as its
consequence.

The second point that is not adequately explored concerns the virtues of clientelism. In
spite of the title, the book pays considerably more attention to the negative effects of
clientelism – in both normative and positive terms – than to the positive ones that were
advertised in the title. The only virtue granted to clientelism is that, under some conditions,
it may be conducive to the delivery of genuine public good and/or economic growth/
development. Oddly, given its title, the book does not adequately explore the possibility
that in ‘difficult democracies’ (to use Sartori’s famous expression) clientelism and
corruption may be the price that democracy has to pay in order to survive. The literature
on constitutional engineering (Linz, Sartori, Skach and Stepan, Valenzuela) made clear
that presidentialism is less likely to sustain democratic rule – especially when the
presidential form of government is coupled with hyper-fragmented party systems
(Mainwaring). The literature on corruption found that the level of corruption registered in countries with a presidential form of government is generally higher than it is in countries with a parliamentary form of government. Unless one is willing to argue that this finding is spurious because it reflects a regional trend (most Latin American countries adopt presidentialism and they are also believed to have high levels of corruption), one possible alternative is that clientelism and corruption may be a device that Presidents, in Latin America and elsewhere, can employ to generate support for the policies that they want to implement, to overcome legislative opposition, and to make democracy work and somehow survive. Similarly, the literature on democratic consolidation has generally indicated that democracy is less likely to survive in ethnically polarised societies with hyper-fragmented party systems, such as Papua New Guinea or Indonesia (Reilly). Yet, democracy, however imperfectly, survives in both settings.

In these settings, does democracy survive in spite of clientelism and corruption or because of it? Or, to make a thought-experiment, if these societies were rid of clientelism and corruption, would their democracies thrive or collapse? The same questions can be asked in the Italian context and I am not in a position to answer them. But if it could be shown that clientelism and political corruption were the price Italian democracy had to pay to survive in spite of many obstacles and adverse conditions (deep cleavages, polarised pluralism, the Fascist legacy, terrorism, and so on), this would make a much more compelling case for why clientelism has its virtues and why the moralistic approach to questions of governance should be abandoned.

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This book deals with a sizeable problem in the political life of southern Italy, the disbanding of councils for presumed Mafia infiltration. Although the highest number of disbandments occurred in the early 1990s – by 1993 over 800,000 people were living in municipalities that had been disbanded – in 2005 the total national figure was still 450,000 (p. 80).

Campania was almost inevitably the worst offender – 80 councils disbanded since 1991 compared with 50 in Sicily, out of a national total of 181. Looked at as a whole, in the Campania region 52% of the 15 councils with more than 15,000 inhabitants have been disbanded at least once – indeed some of them twice. Even more worrying is the fact that 38% of the 1,173,000 inhabitants of the province of Naples have at some stage had their local council disbanded (p. 77).

Mete’s book is a critical analysis of the legislation that provides for council disbandment. Passed in 1991, like so much anti-Mafia legislation, it entered the statute book hurriedly after a Mafia outrage. One of the perennial problems with the legislation is that it disbands councils on a presumptive and preventive basis – no concrete evidence of