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Italian Sociology

The End of the
Global Age?

Martin Albrow

Colonial Legacies
in Kosova

Ibrahim Berisha

Sociology from
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Steve Matthewman,
Holly Thorpe,
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Special Columns

- > Remembering Ishwar Modi
- > Introducing the Turkish Editorial Team

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> In This Issue

Editorial: The Challenge of Global Sociology **2**

> THE STATE OF ITALIAN SOCIOLOGY

Italian Sociology at the Turn of the 21st Century
by Matteo Bortolini, Italy **4**

Gramsci, A Stranger in his Own Land
by Riccardo Emilio Chesta, Italy **6**

Janus-faced Italian Sociology, 1945-1965
by Andrea Cossu, Italy **8**

Internationalizing Italian Sociology, 1970s-2010s
by Flaminio Squazzoni and Aliakbar Akbaritabar, Italy **10**

Gender Stereotypes in Italian Sociology
by Annalisa Murgia, UK and Barbara Poggio, Italy **12**

A Dominated Discipline in the Italian Academy
by Massimiliano Vaira, Italy **14**

> INTERVIEWS FROM AROUND THE WORLD

The End of the Global Age? An Interview with Martin Albrow
by Raisa-Gabriela Zamfirescu and Diana-Alexandra Dumitrescu, Romania **16**

The Legacy of Colonialism in Kosovo: An Interview with Ibrahim Berisha
by Labinot Kunushevci, Kosovo **19**

> SOCIOLOGY FROM AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND

Power Politics in Post-Disaster Ōtautahi
by Steve Matthewman, Aotearoa New Zealand **22**

Creative Sports in Post-Disaster Geographies
by Holly Thorpe, Aotearoa New Zealand **24**

Silencing Abuse
by Elizabeth Stanley, Aotearoa New Zealand **26**

Activism and Academia
by Dylan Taylor, Aotearoa New Zealand **28**

Towards an Indigenous Criminology
by Robert Webb, Aotearoa New Zealand **30**

> REMEMBERING ISHWAR MODI (1940-2017)

Leisure Studies was his Passion
by Rajiv Gupta, India **32**

A Source of Inspiration and Encouragement
by Karl Spracklen, UK **34**

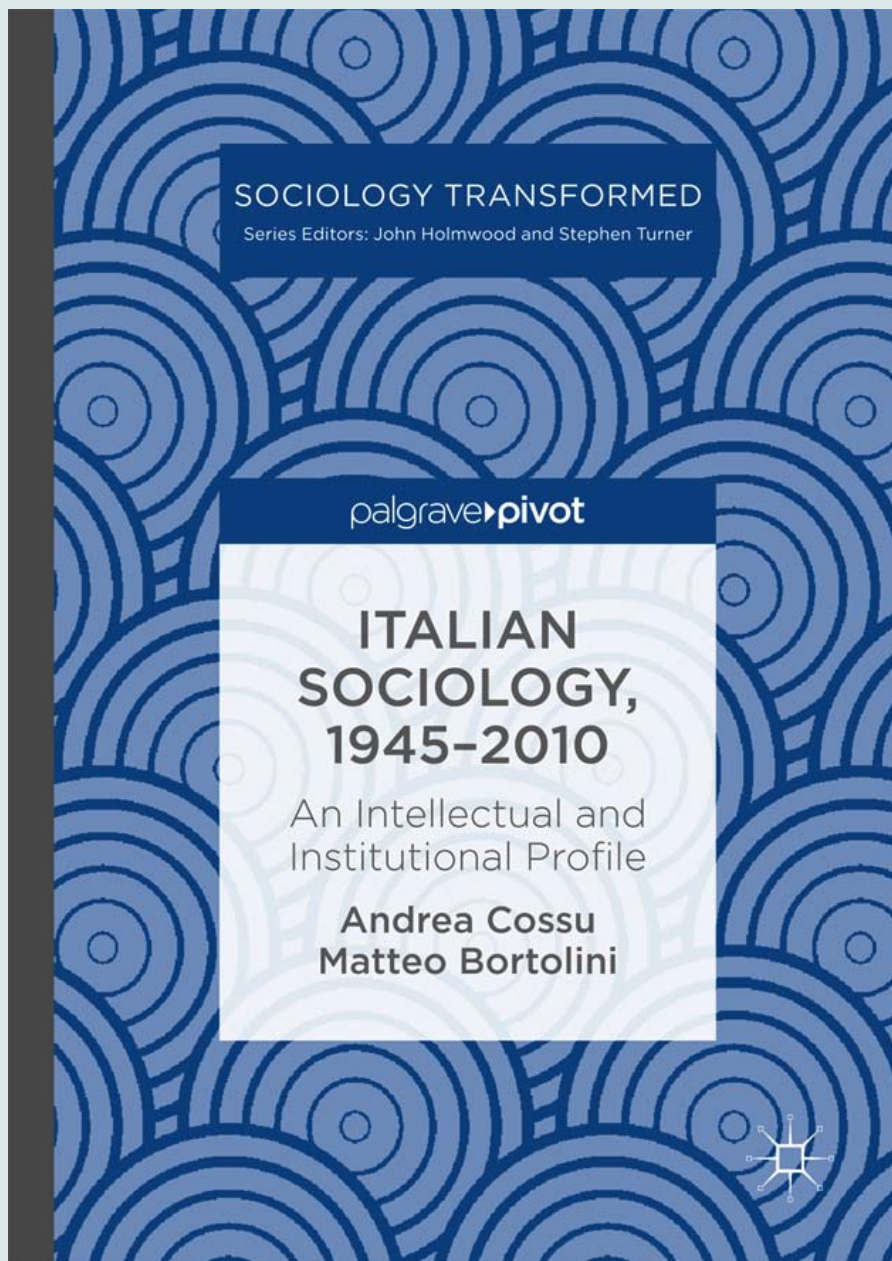
> SPECIAL COLUMN

Introducing the Turkish Editorial Team
by Gül Çorbacıođlu and Irmak Evren, Turkey **36**



> Italian Sociology at the Turn of the 21st Century

by **Matteo Bortolini**, University of Padova, Italy



| Just appeared, *Italian Sociology, 1945-2010* by Andrea Cossu and Matteo Bortolini.

As Andrea Cossu and I have argued in *Italian Sociology 1945-2010: An Intellectual and Institutional Profile*, the early 1990s marked the end of the “heroic,” foundational period of the discipline, giving way to a less charismatic, more professionalized scientific practice, best described as a paradoxical mix of “routinization without standardization.” The lack of a scientific or even pragmatic consensus on topics, methods, or theoretical frameworks affected the day-to-day practice of scientific work and relations between sociologists and their many publics – Italian and foreign colleagues, national and local political elites, social and religious movements, economic actors, and the mass media. Further, it prevented the development of a shared vision of a sociological community, of its professional and ethical standards, or its prospects. The discipline has struggled to construct a new, powerful master narrative about its past, present, or future – so much so, that even old myths of the “rebirth of postwar sociology” or the 1968 student revolts (see [Chesta](#) and [Cossu](#) in this issue, GD7.3) make little sense to young sociologists trained at established academic institutions.

To be sure, as many articles published in *Global Dialogue* have suggested, this pluralization of sociological approaches and research styles has occurred almost everywhere in the last 30 years. In Italy, however, the discipline’s particular history gives postmodern fragmentation a distinctively Italian flavor. Over the last fifteen years, the worldwide neoliberal turn in higher education, with its managerial and market ideologies and its

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attack on the postwar assessment of academic professions, has weakened Italy's *componenti* (camps), three powerful academic groupings that coalesced in the late 1960s around loosely-defined political fault lines – Roman Catholic, Communist, and Socialist. At the same time, younger scholars have been encouraged to widen their geographical, intellectual, and professional horizons, as more Italian sociologists now obtain degrees or take post-doctoral fellowships abroad, routinely participate in international meetings, and are active members of global scientific networks. As a result, some social scientists abandon Italian as their main publishing language, distancing themselves from ossified academic conventions, and making it increasingly unlikely that Italian sociology, as a discipline, can achieve a more defined or consensual image or practice (see [Squazzoni and Akbaritabar](#) in this issue, GD7.3).

In addition to these all-important dynamics, Italian sociology today faces three main challenges: its place within the nation's cultural and intellectual imaginary, its role within social sciences and in neoliberal academe more broadly, and its institutional and associational infrastructure.

One of the biggest problems confronting Italian sociology is its lack of recognition in the national social imaginary (see both [Vaira](#), and [Murgia and Poggio](#) in this issue, GD7.3). Apart from a handful of charismatic individuals from the first generations of sociologists who gained prominence as either top-level politicians or public intellectuals, the influence of the sociological profession on Italian society has been muted. On the one hand, the distant memory of Italy's long 1968 through the 1970s (when several alumni of the University of Trento joined the terrorist group Red Brigades, while other sociologists led New Left organizations) contributes to a persistent im-

age of the sociologist as a partisan and unreliable intellectual – an image reinforced by the current decision, on the part of some social scientists, to act as ideologues, “organic intellectuals,” or consultants in the service of political movements, trade unions, or civil society associations. On the other hand, since the mid-1980s, sociologists have been criticized as flamboyant, to the point that they are often seen as vapid *tuttologi* (know-it-alls). Although a younger generation of colleagues have risen to fame as public intellectuals – among them Ilvo Diamanti, Mauro Magatti, and Giovanni Semi, whose 2015 book *Gentrification* caused a sensation – it will take time and effort to renew the discipline's image, or to re-establish its legitimacy in discussions of social processes.

The destiny of academic sociology remains intertwined with that of Italy's system of higher education. In 2004-05, a national process sought to collect, analyze, and evaluate the scientific output of academic personnel. Although they had few real consequences, the findings painted a grim picture: Italian sociology fared the worst among the social sciences, prompting new efforts to improve the quality of published research. Later, the neoliberal Berlusconi government introduced a radical and much-contested reform of Italian higher education (law 240/2010), causing intense intra- and inter-disciplinary quarrels in late 2012. The publication of the findings of the ASN – the national process of scientific qualification – introduced a novel recruiting mechanism: only one out of five of those who had applied were considered qualified for future positions as full or associate professors. Moreover, Northern Italian universities fared much better than Central and Southern ones, with more candidates awarded the titles needed to further their careers.

As a result, debates about regional and sub-disciplinary inequalities, the

power of the three academic camps, and the discipline's fragmentation were conducted in unusually passionate terms. One of the harshest polemics focused on the evaluative criteria enshrined in the 2010 law, which disproportionately rewarded research-intensive careers. Papers published in foreign journals and membership in global research networks were all rated positively, while teaching and service at one's home institution were not considered worthy of evaluation. On average, cosmopolitan sociologists who had partially or totally turned their backs on Italy's sociological field fared better than their more locally-oriented colleagues.

Ultimately, the controversies over the 2010 reform had a profound, and maybe unexpected, impact on the Italian Sociological Association (AIS), created in 1983 as a shared clearing-house for the three camps to jointly manage the allocation of academic posts and research funding. The association gradually lost prestige and appeal, and its conduct in the aftermath of the publication of the results of the ASN persuaded many academic sociologists to withdraw from the association. As membership has fallen to new lows, the organization is trying to renew itself by strengthening both its public role and its appeal as the discipline's main standard bearer. At the same time, however, economic sociologists – who generally fared better than average in the evaluation of scientific research – decided to abandon the AIS, creating a new sub-disciplinary professional association. In January 2017, the Italian Society of Economic Sociology (SISEC) held its first national conference, with about 220 members enrolled – roughly one out of ten academic sociologists. Only time will tell if this double renewal will bear fruit, and whether it will help Italian sociology move beyond one of the most turbulent and unpredictable phases in its history. ■

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> Janus-faced

Italian Sociology, 1945-1965

by **Andrea Cossu**, University of Trento, Italy



Franco Ferrarotti, one of the founders of professional sociology in Italy.

For scientific disciplines, the path leading to intellectual acceptance and institutionalization is almost invariably difficult, involving not only debates about boundaries, but also the creation of a complex, and sometimes exclusive, infrastructure through which the discipline can establish itself and, hopefully, flourish. Post-World War Two Italy was no exception, particularly for the social sciences. Political science was often perceived as a “Fascist” discipline; statistics bore the stigma of its involvement in colonial efforts. Idealist philosophy ruled, with its frequent critiques of the social sciences – especially against the weakest of all, sociology.

Italian sociology thus took its first baby steps in an unfavorable environment, characterized not only by academic hostility and political attacks from the Italian Communist Party’s organic intellectuals, but also by Italian universities’ institutional constraints, which complicated efforts to create niches for emergent disciplines. A lethal mix of top-down, state-driven bureaucratization and local patrimonial dynamics meant that sociologists had to develop their discipline largely outside of universities. Sociologists helped, though sometimes they did so in a subordinate position, build an infrastructure of research centers, publishing houses, and schools

for social workers – a configuration that had lasting impact even after the 1960s, when sociologists began to be accepted in academic ranks.

In Italy, reflections on the institutionalization of sociology have often revolved around the history of intellectual positions. As Matteo Bortolini and I have argued in *Italian Sociology 1945-2010*, however, one needs to dig deeper to understand why a cohort of young scholars – often marginalized within the established disciplines where they studied – became sociologists and, later, entered academia. The discovery of sociology by this cohort, in other words, has to be

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examined sociologically, with a focus on fields, relations, and processes, thus replacing the focus on agency and intentional strategies that has characterized most previous accounts of the discipline in Italy.

The decade between 1951 (when one of the most important journals, *Quaderni di Sociologia*, was founded by Franco Ferrarotti and by his advisor, philosopher Nicola Abbagnano) and 1961 (when the first three full chairs of sociology were established after a national competition) saw the building of the discipline's infrastructure and the creation of what are still the country's main hubs of sociology. Looking back, Diana Pinto divided this era into two roughly equivalent periods: if 1950-56 was marked by the discovery of sociology, in the latter part of the period, sociology acquired "cultural centrality." But "polycentrism" might have been a better metaphor.

Although the university was a central institution in the Italian intellectual field, sociologists did not turn *en masse* to academe until the late 1960s – when Balbo and colleagues diagnosed sociology as a "sick science," acknowledging the failure of a dream that sociologists could serve as field marshals for the country's modernization, thereby leaving academic positions as sociologists' only viable alternative. Before that shift, sociology's infrastructure in Italy was largely extra-academic, featuring research centers like the Centro Nazionale di Prevenzione e Difesa Sociale in Milan, cultural associations like Il Mulino in Bologna, and political movements like Comunità, founded by the entrepreneur Adriano Olivetti, whose unusual entrepreneurial vision

identified applied social science as a crucial instrument for empowering communities within and outside the factory. These research centers established lasting contacts with cultural foundations and international bodies (like the Ford Foundation and UNESCO), while prominent publishers – including Einaudi, Comunità (again, founded by Olivetti), and Il Mulino – were involved both in intellectual debates about how sociology differs from other disciplines (especially philosophy), and in diffusing empirical analysis and fieldwork. At the same time, a loose network of scholars in some university-based institutes (in Milan, Genoa, Turin, Florence, and Portici) pursued mostly applied research in Industrial Relations, Economic Sociology, Community Studies, and Electoral Geography.

By the end of the 1950s, Italian sociology was thus a Janus-faced discipline, torn between a focus on theory (with a strong functionalist inclination) as a means to achieve legitimacy, and efforts to conduct applied research. The results were mixed. "Theory" often meant a reproduction of dogmatic and partial readings of Parsons, Merton, and Lazarsfeld; fieldwork often involved standard surveys and basic ethnography, with little room for innovative research.

Despite this narrow focus, however, sociology became a "normal science," something that was much needed. The first generation of sociologists (including Ferrarotti, Alessandro Pizzorno, Sabino Acquaviva, Eugenio Pennati, Achille Ardigò, Luciano Cavalli, Giorgio Braga, Filippo Barbano, whose status as "*libero docente*" allowed them to teach courses in

universities) used their expertise and credentials to establish disciplinary hubs in major universities. From that position, they trained a new, more specialized generation, whose members filled the ranks of the discipline in the context of Italy's transition to a mass university system in which Social Sciences became more central.

Thus, during the 1960s, the discipline's landscape changed dramatically. Gone was the dream that sociologists would serve as advisors to the prince for Italy's modernization; instead, sociology found a more stable status within and outside the academia, which now became the major site for sociological training and reproduction. The first degree-granting institution was founded in Trento, in 1962; after this fateful choice, other Faculties of Sociology were established, along with majors in sociology in Faculties of Political Science.

Thus, some twenty years after the timid attempts to legitimize sociology in Italy, the academicization of sociology began in full force. For a long period, sociology had been a discipline whose field and habits was shaped more by the routine demands of research than by the intellectual prestige associated with acceptance by academe. Not surprisingly, this long exile from university rooms had huge consequences, shaping not only sociologists' attitude, but also the type of research that was favored, as well as the theoretical orientation of even major figures. It was only from the late 1960s (and even more forcefully during the 1970s) that Italian sociology took decisive steps towards theoretical, empirical, and methodological sophistication. ■

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