What is an anti-system party? Some clarifications

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The article by Bickerton and Accetti (2018) recently published in *Contemporary Italian Politics* offers me an opportunity to clarify some issues related to anti-system parties. Due to space limitations, I focus only on the most important ones.

First: 'anti-system' is *not* a synonym for 'anti-democratic'

Bickerton and Accetti (2018, 134) argue that anti-system parties 'oppose [...] the "democratic" form of government'. However, neither Sartori nor I, in revisiting the concept, ever use the term 'anti-system' as a synonym for 'anti-democratic'. The fact that Sartori (1976, 154, 1982, 300) considered the Gaullists under the French Fourth Republic as well as *Solidarność* in Communist Poland as anti-system actors provides clear evidence in this respect. Similarly, I also explicitly emphasised 'the importance of conceiving the positive term "system" and its negation "anti-system" as "neutral" and "relative"' (Zulianello 2018, 654).

Second: ungrounded assumptions about party systems

Bickerton and Accetti (2018, 135) argue that the anti-system label 'remains tied to a notion of "polarised pluralism"'. Nevertheless, Sartori (1976, 1982) considered *inter alia*, the Dutch *Boerenpartij* and *Solidarność* in Poland to be 'anti-system', and neither of these national party systems represented an instance of 'polarised pluralism'. Furthermore, by arguing that the concept of anti-system cannot be used for parties rejecting the traditional left-right categories, the authors overlook the fact that Sartori's (1976, 154) left-right space is based 'on "constitutional" policy positions'. For example, as Mudde (2014, 219) emphasises, following the Sartorian conceptualisation, populist parties qualify as anti-system, not because they reject democracy *per se*, but rather because they question 'some key aspects of liberal democracy: most notably pluralism and minority rights'. Meanwhile, they overlook my emphasis on a variety of 'metapolicies' that play a powerful role in structuring party competition (Zulianello 2018, 659–662).

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Third: overlooking conceptual dimensionality

While it would require far too much space to recall the major differences between my approach and the 'classical' perspectives on anti-system parties (see Zulianello 2018, 2019, ch2), here it suffices to recall that I suggested focussing on *two* dimensions: an anti-system party qualifies as such in the light of *both* its antagonistic ideological profile *and* its status of non-integration in cooperative interactions at the systemic level. I maintained that the focus has to be placed on both the assessment of a party's core ideological concepts vis-à-vis the meta-political system *as well as* on the determination of the party's very visible interactions with the latter (direct and indirect).

However, concerning the first constitutive property of my revisited concept, Bickerton and Accetti (2018, 145, fn4) argue that 'Zulianello himself classes the M5s as an "anti-system" party [...] because of some of its members' ostensible support for withdrawal from the European Union, or at least the Eurozone'. Here, what it is striking is that I never wrote anything of the sort! In my article I made no reference to individual party members' positions; instead, I emphasised that 'in order to avoid conflating different levels of analysis [...] it is necessary to focus on the core ideological concepts of a party' (Zulianello 2018, 660). In my 2018 article, I never argued that the M5s was 'anti-system' because of its orientation towards the EU; to be sure, elsewhere (Zulianello 2019, 149, emphasis added) I emphasised that 'neither an anti-EU nor an anti-Euro stance represents a *core element of the ideological morphology* of the M5s'. Instead, I maintained that it is precisely the populist nucleus of the M5s, and thus its attitudes towards important elements of liberal-representative democracy, that constitutes the most unequivocal source of an ideologically inspired metapolitical opposition (i.e. towards the political regime) (Zulianello 2018, 2019).

Here, it is worth emphasising that whereas populist parties would be considered anti-system by default following the classical Sartorian approach, my revisited conceptualisation makes it possible to make a major distinction between populist actors according to their status as parties that are either integrated or not integrated into the 'system' (Zulianello 2018, 2019). In this respect, following the 2018 general elections, while the M5s clearly remains a populist actor, it has evolved from an 'anti-system' into a 'halfway house party' – another cell within my typology – given its achievement of systemic integration (*ibidem*). In other words, the status of the M5s is now one of 'negative integration', like many of its populist counterparts in Europe, precisely because of the persistence of an ideological antagonism towards *specific elements* of liberal-representative democracy (i.e. the regime) despite its changing systemic status (*ibidem*).

Finally, I should like to reply to the 'allegation' of conceptual stretching raised by Bickerton and Accetti (2018, 146, fn4) who argue that: 'the UK's Conservative Party [...] would count as substantively "anti-system"'. Here, three simple considerations are sufficient to reject the allegation (to be honest, the first alone would suffice). First, the Conservatives clearly present the property of 'systemic integration'. Second, the Brexit referendum had an impact on the *metapolitical* structure: that is, it affected the very 'system' itself. Third, Brexit is not a 'core' concept of the Conservative Party's *ideology* (cf. Ball 1999), as shown by the historical divisions within the party over the EU issue

and by the continuous controversies over the modality and timing of the process of withdrawal.

In sum, in my revisited approach, I suggested focussing on both the ideological core(s) of a party *and* its visible systemic interactions; unfortunately, Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti neglect both. Finally, I wonder what the difference is between a 'substantively' and 'non-substantively' anti-system party, as I never used such terminology.

Disclosure statement

Notes on contributor

Mattia Zulianello's main research interests are populism, party systems and QCA. He is the author of Anti-system parties: from parliamentary breakthrough to government (Routledge, 2019).

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