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"*TENGO FAMIGLIA*": THE FAMILY AS A METAPHOR OF CORRUPTION IN ITALY

DAVIDE TORSELLO

Abstract: In this article I will pursue two goals: the first is to outline how the family works as a metaphor in public discourses on corruption; the second is to consider some aspects in social anthropology that have influenced the creation of theoretical paradigms on corruption through the analytical filter of kinship. The final idea of this article is that the metaphor of the family, although not new in the context of corruption, serves to create cognitive schemas of reference that simplify and banalise the debate on corruption, by diverting attention from its true nature. The persistence of the importance of the metaphor of "I have a family" may imply new forms and meanings of corruption in Italy, including the importance of the mechanisms of social exchange, the practice of building symbolic relationships and the change in social roles and power within these dynamics and transactions.

Keywords: corruption; Italy; clientelism; anthropology; symbolism.

Introduction

One of the social aspects of corruption that at a first glance may not seem very innovative, but that in reality is enlightening, is the metaphor of the family. In recent years in Italy the family is being increasingly referred to media and specialists in the subject than it was during the Clean Hands movement in the 1990s. The indication does not seem to be that the familistic and nepotistic aspects, as well as the facilitations associated with corruption, have changed over time, but rather that the family metaphor is used more today in relation to the complexity the phenomenon of corruption has acquired in Italy. In this article I will pursue two goals: the first is to outline how the family works as a metaphor in public discourses on corruption; the second is to consider some aspects in social anthropology that have influenced the creation of theoretical paradigms on corruption through the analytical filter of kinship. The final idea in this article is that the metaphor of the family, although not new in the context of corruption, serves to create cognitive schemas of reference that simplify and banalise the debate on corruption, by diverting attention from its true nature.

Clientelism, familism and the family

Clientelism is a topic of strong interest in the human and social sciences, which has received attention in political science, sociology, anthropology and history studies for at least four decades now. What makes this concept interesting is the methodological paradox at the basis of its analysis. The practices of clientelism are universal: the term derives from the Latin *clientes*, and its application, in classical history, ranges from the Roman Empire, to the Meso-American empires, China, India and Japan. Although one can agree in principle on the analytical sphere of this "universalism", it is difficult to ignore, in the reality of the empirical treatment, the socio-cultural differences that distinguish these practices. In fact, they generally refer to the use of particularistic ties in order to achieve personal and privileged access to goods, services and resources. This type of use is of a universal character because, as Gellner (1977, p. 1) pointed out, what makes patronage a universal practice is that it constitutes a form of power, even if power is not always a form of patronage.

To understand the different levels of social interaction in which one engages in within practices of clientelism however, it is necessary to start with a definition that bounds the fields of action and ideology. Lemarchand defines political clientelism as

> a more personal, emotional and reciprocal relationship between actors, or sets of actors, to control resources managed unequally and that include transactions of benefits with political ramifications beyond the immediate sphere of dyadic relations (Lamarchand, 1972, p. 69).

This definition highlights a series of analytical points of importance to determine the scope of functionality of clientelism. First, clientelism is a personal (and personalistic) relationship that replaces or supplements social ties of abstract types. The prevalence of ties based on friendship, acquaintance or the sharing of affection and emotions has been explained by both social and cultural argumentations. This is because clientelism is, to quote Gellner, "a system, a style, and a moral climate" (Gellner, 1977, p. 3).

The second point is that clientelism is an asymmetrical relationship between individuals or groups of individuals. Despite the idea of the use of personal ties and the emphasis on quasi-affective relations which marks these practices, the relationship between the patron and the client is one of power, and therefore of the superiority of the former over the latter. The power inherent in this relationship is expressed through the bond of dependence between the two parties entering into an exchange mechanism. Scott points out that the balance in a power relationship is based on the calculation of the costs and benefits of the exchange (Scott, 1977). Once there is a shift in the value of a given service (the favour of the patron), its legitimacy may be affected and the mechanism altered. This results in two dominant ideas among scholars. The first is that the patron is the supreme manager of client relations, since he has privileged access to resources and assets that he can or is willing to distribute to those who do not have access to them. The second, on the other hand, is that the client may be able to influence the behaviour of the patron when he freely ceases to be his subordinate. All this is due to a shift in the power balance. Anthropology has put greater emphasis not so much on how the balance shifts between the two parties, but on how the dyadic relationship (of power between the two parties) is considered questionable, acceptable or tolerable in a societal or cultural context. In other words, clientelism exists

not simply as an attempt to maintain the established order, but as a shared idea in society that such an order, and the morality in relation to it, may be helpful to individuals or to the community as a whole (Torsello, 2011).

Italy is one of the most well studied cases by Italian and foreign experts of clientelism and corruption. One of the contributions that became a milestone in the study of patronage is the famous work of Banfield on Montegrano in the mid-1950s (Banfield, 1958). Banfield, an American political scientist at Harvard, who later increased his fame by becoming political advisor to two US presidents, decided less than a decade after the end of World War II to study a small village in the Apennines of Lucania. Montegrano (or Chiaromonte, the real name of the village) was a community of three thousand people, where Banfield decided to use semi-anthropological methods to study the psychological and cultural bases of cooperation and interpersonal trust and their relationship to economic development. Banfield's main thesis is that the economic underdevelopment of this village, which he attributed by extension to the whole of Southern Italy, should be read through careful analysis of the moral, economic and political characteristics of the people living in that community. The conclusion to which Banfield came is that the Chiaromontesi would not have been able to achieve satisfactory levels of cooperation because of the prevalence of a familist moral (the famous *amoral familism*) that led individuals to avoid cooperation and to prefer the pursuit of the narrow interests of the nuclear family. What is relevant here is the political aspect of this ethos. Banfield was interested in understanding whether the type of communist and socialist ideologies, that in the period of his research had become particularly strong in many Italian regions, could emerge in that socio-cultural context, and his explanation incorporates some of the themes and descriptions of the famous *Christ Stopped at Eboli* by Carlo Levi, a publication which was widely successful in the USA.[1] One of Banfield's responses to this research question makes use of the theme of clientelism and patronage between the upper (the nobility and large landowners) and the lower classes (artisans and farmers, but also other professionals).

The dependence of the lower class on the upper class was a striking social characteristic of this community, where at the time of Banfield's research, over 40 percent of its population was illiterate. Banfield examines the problem of the penetration of left-wing ideals, focusing on horizontal, i.e. cooperative and participatory, rather than vertical ties, such as those of hierarchical integration and patronage. Reportedly, the first would not have taken root in Montegrano (and southern Italy) because of an alleged generalized distrust and suspicion towards those who, while not holding authoritarian positions, would have developed initiatives dedicated to achieving the common good. According to the amoral familistic ethos, in fact, anyone who wants to interpret the needs of the public and act correspondingly will be judged negatively and will be suspected of looking, in reality, for his own profit and advantage, because due to the shared morality everyone is expected to behave in the same manner. This, as several Italian and foreign sources[2] have criticized, is a

[1] The first English edition was published in 1945, seven years before Banfield started his research in Basilicata.

[2] The Italian edition of the volume by Banfield was published in 1976 and contains important and critical contributions by Italian and foreign anthropologists and sociologists. See also Meloni (1997).

circular explanation. Nonetheless, Banfield's amoral familism continues to be cited as one of the cultural explanations of the difference between the paths and the extent of economic development in southern and northern Italy. Notwithstanding this, the idea that the whole country, with little regional differentiation, is characterized by high degrees of corruption and endemic clientelism has recently become widespread. Rossetti (1994) introduced a different approach, although now outdated, in which he examined some of the historical and institutional aspects that would have consolidated a patronage system in Italy. In this system, the state acted as patron against companies or privileged economic sectors. The institutional factors Rossetti identified included, in particular, the lack of autonomy of the judiciary and the legal authorities from politics, particularly when compared to other western European countries.

Finally, the idea of the political ramifications beyond the immediate sphere of the dyadic relation refers to the durability of patron-client ties. This has long constituted one of the most contested points in patronage theory. On the one hand, political and anthropological accounts of the benefits of clientelism seem to emphasise either the short-term conditions of the transaction (once the favour has been reciprocated the transaction ends), or the long-term ideology, often stressed by those who underline the moral commitment established in the clientelistic dyad (Boissevain, 1974; Lomnitz, 1971; Woodall, 1996; Pardo, 2004; Schneider & Schneider, 2003; Torsello, 2003, 2012). The point, I believe, is not exactly whether these relationships have long or short-term implications for those tied by them, but whether or not their durability is perceived by local actors, including those who are not part of the patronage system. Silverman, for instance, underlines the need to differentiate between emic and etic perspectives on patronage practices and ideas (1977), stating that to understand the emic approach to clientelism one needs to pay adequate attention to the difference between verbal expression, ideologies and perceived social benefits. Referring to an example in Umbria (Italy), she analyzes the historical phases under which changes in the ideology and use of patronage have been introduced, and the perceived duration of these practices. Eisenstadt and Roniger (1984), on the other hand, reflect on the tension between the rationale of these practices (the pursuit of the patron's and of the client's respective interests) and the condition of social anomaly in which they are generated, expressed—among many—by a weak predisposition (and optimism) towards controlling and changing the established order. These positions have in common a concern for the dialectical strength of clientelism, which is not merely a dyadic power relationship, or an ethos, but constitutes a cosmology, a way of perceiving and featuring the social world. This idea is confirmed by much of the most recent anthropological literature on corruption, which draws a useful working distinction between corruption practices and corruption talk (Shore & Haller, 2005). In his research on postsocialist Europe (Torsello, 2003, 2007), Torsello found that increased social uncertainty and dramatic social changes bring about a shift in the perception of what is trust, as well as in its actual utility. Institutional trust, is, for instance, highly permeated by interpersonal trust, in many instances making it impossible to distinguish significantly between the two. This would, for instance, explain the enduring informality in several areas of the social life of individuals in this region. Personalistic ties are not immune to the impact of these changes, and the most obvious field to which uncertainty applies is the duration of patron-client relationships.

Corruption and the notion of "*tengo famiglia*"

The anthropological work on corruption is very recent and still exiguous. The difficulties encountered in the discipline in examining practices of mismanagement or fraudulent conduct are mostly related to the nature of the phenomenon. First of all, it is not easy to study practices often located on the edge of legality without denouncing the position of those who are involved. This would lead to the anthropologist playing a role, as observer, which is contrary to the ethical principles of field research. Anthropological deontology holds that the researcher ought not to expose informants in descriptions of local practices and ideas, even when such practices break or endanger rules, laws and shared norms. It seems evident that the attempt to explain the phenomenon of corruption in a society may easily go against these deontological prescriptions, as it makes it possible to discriminate between "honest citizens" and "dishonest citizens".

Secondly, corruption is a phenomenon that is difficult to observe during fieldwork, because the anthropologist who expresses his desire to investigate its socio-cultural implications often ends up finding closed doors. Access to information of this type is often barred by respondents and consequently it becomes difficult to continue the research itself. It is no coincidence that most of the anthropologists who have successfully dealt with corruption have done so by starting from other research topics, and arriving at it because informants have mentioned these practices.

Thirdly, corruption is a practice which has also its language. Many of the anthropological positions on the matter have explored this assumption. It is important for anthropology to be able to provide ethnographic accounts of how corruption is expressed, its language, its rhetorical and discursive power. This, however, should not be confused with the political, economic and social functions of corruption. Saying and doing are two different things and, because of the secrecy surrounding these practices (Nuijtel & Anders, 2007), what the anthropologist does is often to provide an analysis of the language of corruption, and less of the impact of its practices in the social reality studied. This is because following the forms of expression on corruption is often an effective way of communicating with the informants themselves, who are prone to denouncing a reality that may be more or less acceptable to them (Pardo, 2004).

Finally, a major discussion regarding the nature of knowledge on this phenomenon concerns the question of its definition. One of the most common working definitions of corruption is "a manipulation of powers of government or sale of government property, or both by government officials for personal use" (Shleifer & Vishny, 1998; Jain, 1998). A similar qualification has been given by Morris "a behaviour by a public official that deviates from public interest" (1991) and is widely accepted by international institutions such as the World Bank "*the abuse of public office for private gain*" (World Bank, 1997, p. 8).

Corruption, then, is very often defined as the misuse of public power for private benefits (Lambsdorff, 2007). For anthropology, this well accepted definition is very problematic since it is based partly on a strong private-public dichotomy. Anthropological studies have produced abundant evidence on the point that this dichotomy is context dependant (see chapters in Pardo, 2004; Nuijtel & Anders, 2007). In the eyes of anthropologists, the public sphere is not easily defined, especially in opposition to the private one. This perspective derives from anthropological investigations on bottom-up approaches, using an inductive analytical line which constructs (or de-constructs) institutions, norms and conventions. In

anthropological epistemology, the truth of a social reality can be discovered only when the observer (the scientist) gives voice to the observed, uses his/her words, his/ her symbols, practices and discourses.

The metaphor of *tengo famiglia*

The metaphorical expression "tengo famiglia (I have a family)", well-known in Italy, has a peculiar story. It is said that the term was introduced by the journalist Leo Longanesi, who in 1945 proposed adding it to the Italian flag. It is common knowledge, however, that this expression is associated with the words of the writer and humorist Ennio Flaiano, who allegedly suggested replacing the Italian tricolour with that of the royal Savoy family and adding the expression underneath. The idea of "*tengo famiglia*" is also slightly tinged with a southern Italianism, because of the use of the verb "*tenere*" (to have or hold) instead of "*avere*" (to have), which is more frequent in Southern than in Northern Italian dialects. The connections with the above-mentioned concept of familism are easy to detect. In reference to the scandal that affected the leadership of the Northern League party formerly led by Umberto Bossi and his family in 2012, a member of an extreme right party, Fiamma Tricolore (Tricolour Flame) stated:

> Meanwhile, the ones who have ranted for decades against "southern" immorality par excellence, chanting at a respectable North of work and meritocracy, fell on the "southerner front" of the *tengo famiglia.* [3]

It seems very easy to establish a relationship between the importance of the concept of family, nepotism, corruption and southern Italy. The problem arises when not only journalists, but even judges themselves start reflecting on the changes in the phenomenon of corruption in recent years on these terms. In this case, the paradigm of a corrupting gesture bound up with coping with the needs of the family, or maintaining family ties through networks of favouritism and complex social exchange mechanisms, ends up assuming an aura of morality à-la-Banfield, which seems unquestionable.

One of the points on which analysts of recent developments in the phenomenon of corruption in Italy focus is the idea that today corruption is no longer confined to the scenes of political parties. Tracking what magistrate Greco defines as the "sailing coordinates of corruption"[4] has today become increasingly difficult. On the one hand, in fact, corruption and bribery-related crimes are becoming less disentangled from white collar crimes committed in the private sphere, such as financial fraud, money laundering, information trade and stock manipulation, to name but a few. In this sense, the legal domain to which corruption belongs is enlarging, making both investigations and sentencing much more difficult. On the other hand, the impression is that corruption has shifted from being a top-down mechanism, where the corrupted, political parties of the Tangentopoli era imposed the price of the bribe on the company, to one in which the rules of the game are arranged directly from below

[3] In Fiamma Tricolore web news, accessed on September 15, 2013, later removed.

[4] In Italian: "punto nave della corruzione".

(the corruptors). This does not mean that companies are free to decide on the extent of the bribe, but that because of the greater proximity of companies to their intermediaries and local/national political exponents, it is possible to negotiate the process of bribe-giving using the private sector's logics, accountancy strategies and by resorting to offshore or ghost companies. This gives much stronger (perceived) "purchasing power" to corruptors than in the past, rendering corruption a less feared option.

This contrasts with clientelism, in which the client cannot easily make a decision on ways to influence the patron, because of the dyadic relationship existing between the two. In this setting of transformation, the mechanism of corruption works under well-defined logics, which appear increasingly obscure to the investigators themselves, and inventive and evocative to the ordinary citizen in the forms the media describe them. This constitutes a process described by the anthropologist Olivier de Sardan (1999) as one of the "banalisation of corruption". It is a mechanism that creates, through the contribution of the media, a distorted perception of what corruption is. This perception shifts the problem from the political arena in which corruption should be seen as illegal and criminal, to a metaphorical realm in which, as the phrase "tengo famiglia" runs, corruption becomes a kind of iconoclasm of a "morally" acceptable act. Banalisation, therefore, publicly helps to make corruption a minor issue from the point of view of the political, economic and social risks and damage, and also makes it a metaphor for a common, and even justifiable, act in the light of social exchange mechanisms.

From tangent to gelatinous liquid: The transformation of Italian corruption

The transformation of corruption in recent years has had a perverse, but very direct, impact on its social functionality: it has gone from being an exclusion mechanism, to being an inclusive one. The Tangentopoli era celebrated corruption at the level of the political parties that benefited from networks of large enterprises to assign contracts, privileges and monopolies. Corruption was an elitist and exclusive system for which the kickback (in Italian *tangente*, "tangent") was the dominant metaphorical expression that defined not only a way of proceeding (by touching part of a curve, and therefore difficult to grasp and predict), but mainly referred to the complex mechanism by which the tangent could come into contact with the curve, i.e. the political world. Today, corruption is less frequently metaphorically defined as tangent and increasingly as a "gelatinous system in which different actors are immersed." The metaphor has changed substantially, from being the point at which two different lines meet, to a system in which everyone is immersed in the same sticky liquid, which glues and unites, just like family ties. Corruption becomes then an expression of a system of social relations that does not seek to get closer to a distant goal (once the parties or their representatives), but rather is aware of its cohesiveness power, of being able to keep different types of actors interrelated, under the form of a viscous and gelatinous liquid. It is a short step from this metaphor to the "tengo famiglia".

The journalist Simone Pieranni[5] compares the Italian system of favours with the spread of nepotism and corruption in China. The first comparison that Pieranni develops

[5] http://www.linkiesta.it/cina-corruzione-meritocrazia, accessed on October 2, 2013.

is one between the motto of "tengo famiglia" and a Confucian saying: "Fathers cover up the misdeeds of the children, the children cover up the misdeeds of their fathers: the righteousness lies in that" (Pieranni, 2012). The article goes on to outline the terms of comparison by introducing the concept of *guanxi* (contact), well known in anthropological and sociological fields. G*uanxi* is one of the most cited cultural expressions of the mechanisms of corruption in China (Yang 1992). As characterized in the social science literature, *guanxi* evades some of the main theories on corruption, as it is more a mechanism for exchange, generalized reciprocity, than an act of corruption. Its focus is primarily on the interdependence between the two actors, and secondly on the socio-cultural parameters through which this dependence, in order to obtain illegal favours, is explained and justified. The Confucian precept of *guanxi* is that every (significant) relationship produces obligations and duties that are well defined, depending on the nature of the relationship: whether they are hierarchical or egalitarian.

Returning to Pieranni's article, the following statement emphasizes the metaphorical bases on which the putative similarity between Italy and China is addressed:

> "Tengo famiglia", I am seeking a "hook", I create a network, and then, almost always, I nourish it in a very simple way: with a kickback. And the circle is complete.

Hence, the idea of establishing closely knit social ties through favouritism and corruption seems to be a recurrent explanation for the persistence and transformation of this phenomenon in Italy. Whether a comparison with China is meaningful is an issue that goes beyond the scope of this paper. I considered it more significant to show how some of the "opinion makers" that help the public to construct the metaphors and symbols of such a widespread practice make use of culturalistic explanations that often contribute to the banalisation of this phenomenon at the level of public discourse.

Conclusion: Metaphors of the family

What emerges from this paper is the way in which the metaphor has moved from the "home environment given by ties of affinity to be taken care of", to being a tool for the creation of interpersonal relationships and mechanisms for the exchange of favours. As Lakoff and Johnson (1980) maintain, it is a shift from a structural to an ontological metaphor, serving different cognitive purposes, that matters most to our daily reality. In the case of the idea of "tengo famiglia" these cognitive purposes can be, for example:

– I act in the context of family relationships
– I am not able to ignore the needs of the family in making my choices
– I am in a position of responsibility towards my family
– It is understood that I will take care of my family in making my choices
– In the area of public morality, my family can not be forgotten.

These explanations are inserted into a cultural context that is based on shared values that support or hinder the signification of metaphors. The transition from Tangentopoli to the gelatinous system is proof that the semantic and cognitive shift from the search of the 'point of tangency' to the immersion in a 'sticky liquid' is occurring at a time in history when

Italian (and global) politics has lost legitimacy, and the very phenomenon of corruption was affected by this change. The persistence of the importance of the metaphor of "I have family" can imply new forms and meanings of corruption in Italy, including the importance of the mechanisms of social exchange, the practice of building symbolic relationships and the change of social roles and power within these dynamics and transactions.

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Department of Social and Human Sciences,
University of Bergamo,
piazza Rosate 2,
24129 Bergamo,
Italy
E-mail: davide.torsello@unibg.it