

# Pietro Grilli di Cortona and Argentina

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Pietro Grilli di Cortona shared with us a desire for understanding the challenges faced by contemporary democracy across national borders. In the last years of his life, Pietro participated in a joint academic venture involving Roma Tre University – which he was part of – and a group of Argentinian researchers belonging to *Las nuevas formas políticas* (a research team at University of Buenos Aires' *Instituto Gino Germani*) and University of San Martín's School of Politics and Government.

The first academic meeting in that exchange program was held in Rome (2014) and hosted by Pietro. In 2015, the second meeting took place in Buenos Aires, but Pietro excused himself for not being able to travel and sent us his article. Soon after that, we were told he had passed away. Our joint venture, however, lived on, and the articles discussed in both meetings were gathered in 2016, in a book that obviously included Pietro's work and was published *in memoriam* for him. This book was launched at Roma Tre in November 2016,<sup>1</sup> giving us the opportunity to pay tribute to him with his closest relatives and fellow researchers.

Pietro had already earned renown and respect for his work both in Italy and beyond. In 2013, he had been elected as chairman of the *Società Italiana di Scienza Politica* (SISP) and authored a vast array of books and papers on democratization, democratic regimes, and the fall of non-democratic regimes. The books he wrote or co-wrote with other prestigious Italian authors will continue to be a key source of knowledge for those who share his interest on those issues.<sup>2</sup>

We could mention all the subjects he broached along his academic career, but we find ourselves specially attached to the article he prepared for our meetings, which was finally included in the book we launched in Rome (2016). Under the title *¿Crisis o transformación? Cómo cambia la democracia* [Crisis or Transformation? How Democracy Changes], he wrote a solid scholarly chapter that brilliantly, yet disappointedly, addresses the main challenges facing contemporary democracy. His deep insight into the world around us strikes us as much as his sensitivity throughout the discussion of such challenges. Pietro

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<sup>1</sup> Oswaldo Iazzetta and Maria Rosaria Stabili (eds), *Las transformaciones de la democracia. Miradas cruzadas entre Europa y América Latina*, Buenos Aires, Editorial Prometeo, Università Roma Tre, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed review of his work, see Barbara Pisciotta's article in this volume.

identifies the main sources of unrest hurting contemporary democracy, and he notices that, rather than a crisis, a transformation is taking place which will gradually and systematically redirect it towards a new dimension for its liberal features.

Major threats no longer come, as they used to, from external enemies that openly oppose democracy, but from self-proclaimed democrats who seek to transform it from within. It seems paradoxical that these dangers are lurking in a period when democracy is spreading all across the world as a successful model and few people dare to explicitly question its value.

Growing citizen dissatisfaction with democracy's institutional performance and with its meager results is a breeding ground for such threats. There are multiple signs of unrest and discontent over old democracies, stemming not only from their representatives' failure to comply but also from the systemic limitations faced by democracy in a globalized world where politics have become less central and have proven to be powerless in avoiding the transfer of decision-making processes to domains that fall outside the scope of democratic control. This is bringing into crisis some key democratic institutions, such as elections, which are seeing an increase in citizen abstention. Indeed, Pietro poses the following question: How can we expect constituents to still believe that voting is useful, effective, and essential for a democracy while elections are becoming increasingly irrelevant when it comes to defining the course of the policies adopted by our governments?

These concerns, expressed by Pietro in the article he wrote in 2015, have turned out to be premonitory, as they anticipate with an insightful perception some of the events that would later shake the democratic scene in Europe and the United States, such as Brexit, president Trump's victory, Mr Renzi's defeat in the referendum on Italy's political reform, and the specter of populism spreading its wings all over Europe. All of them are signs of public discontent and they account for an anti-establishment cleavage that feeds on said discontent.

There lies the key worth of his article, and we suggest that it be read in this tone. Although there is a sense of disenchantment hovering over Pietro's concerns, he is wise enough to recognize that democracy is no longer –and will never be– what it used to be, while still trying to find new ways to understand and exercise it as a condition to provide it with some relevance and density in today's world. Pietro's hopeful disenchantment is a goodbye of sorts, a true legacy that deserves to be valued in its full dimension.