



Mario Stoppino – A Bio-bibliographical Note

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Mario Stoppino (1935–2001) was Professor of Political Science at the University of Pavia, Italy. A student of the Collegio Ghislieri, Pavia, he read Law and graduated in 1958 under the supervision of Bruno Leoni. Stoppino played a significant role in the development of political science in Italy and was, at various times, President of the Italian Society of Political Science, President of the Centre for Political Science at the Feltrinelli Foundation in Milan, and Editor of the journal *Quaderni di Scienza Politica*.

From his earliest works onwards, Stoppino's approach to the study of politics combined an interest in concrete political phenomena with a strong orientation towards theory. In his first book, *Potere politico e stato* [*Political Power and the State*] (1968), he identified what he saw as the central problem underlying the possibility of a fully developed science of politics: the construction of a general theory of politics capable of satisfying the dual requirement of delimiting the object of study (the nature of politics itself) and asserting the autonomy of political studies with respect to the other social sciences.

Stoppino saw the concept of power as central to the definition and interpretation of politics. Although such a characterization of politics was undeniably to be found in a long tradition of thought from Machiavelli and Hobbes to the theorists of 'reason of state', to Weber and to the Italian elitists, in Stoppino's view that characterization remained in need of a solid grounding in more recent scientific methodology. This observation led his research in the direction of a critical evaluation of the theories of the Chicago School (Merriam, Catlin and, above all, Lasswell, whose main works he translated and edited in Italian) which, in the 1920s and 1930s, had begun a major effort to renew the study of politics and had similarly singled out power as the key political phenomenon.

Stoppino's thought is strongly influenced by the Chicago School – as

can be seen, for example, in the importance he attributes to the symbolic dimension of politics. However, Stoppino's outlook diverges from theirs in terms of the answers he gives to the central question of the relation between politics and power. Stoppino rejects Laswell's identification of politics with power tout court, on the ground that it implies too broad an interpretation of the nature of political phenomena and is therefore inadequate in guiding empirical political research. In Stoppino's view, the central concept of politics consists in power of a certain kind, which he defines, following Weber, in terms of the monopoly of violence. On the other hand, Laswell's insights on the nature of power are nevertheless given their place in Stoppino's framework. For Stoppino, once the central phenomenon of politics has been identified as political power, or the power of governments, it is important also to recognize that this power works within a set of 'conditionings' (forms of power) which influence it. These further powers, which Stoppino calls 'politically relevant', form, together with political power, the 'political structure'. The notion of political structure is then complemented by that of the 'political process', which comprises political facts that are classifiable in terms of three general types of action: the struggle for power, political pressure, and political participation (*Potere e teoria politica [Power and Political Theory]*, 1st ed., 1982).

Despite the advantages of the above account, Stoppino nevertheless came to see it as inadequate. While it is true that the concept of political power employed in that account is embedded in a wider context of politically relevant powers, that concept serves merely to denote, and not to explicate, the various phenomena it singles out. This observation led Stoppino's subsequent research in two directions: first, that of deepening and further systematizing his conceptualization of power; secondly, that of establishing a more meaningful, explanatory connection between power and politics. The first line of research resulted in an important distinction between formal aspects of power, which consist in the ways in which power is exercised, and substantive aspects of power, which are defined by reference to the resources utilized in power relations. The formal aspects of power relations are set out in a fine-grained typology (*Una classificazione formale del potere [A Formal Classification of Power]*, 1989, the English translation of which is published for the first time in the present issue of this journal), while the substantive aspects are set out in a separate, independent classification (*Potere, scambio e dominio [Power, Exchange and Domination]*, 1993). The second line of research led Stoppino to characterize political action in terms of conduct consisting in the pursuit of guaranteed power – i.e. power that has been stabilized over time and generalized over space (*Che cos'è la politica [What is Politics?]*, 1994). This last step implied the definitive abandonment of the model based on the merely denotative notion of political power, a reformulation of the

central theoretical assumptions, and a redefinition of the concept of political power itself. In the new version, political power is guaranteed power, in the form of political authority, which in turn produces guaranteed power, in the form of rights conferred on individuals and groups (*Sul concetto di potere politico* [On the Concept of Political Power], 2001, published posthumously).

Stoppino's premature death prevented the further development of his general theory of politics. Nevertheless, the writings he left behind allow us to gain a reasonably complete picture of the essentials of that theory, and it is to be hoped that their dissemination in English will prove useful to the international community of scholars interested in further deepening our understanding of the concept of power and its role in the social sciences.