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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Technocrats in (the crises of) the state. Political change and state transformations in Italy

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ABSTRACT (max 150 words)

Technocracy is one of the main issues in contemporary social sciences scholarship. While many authors have written on, among others themes, the rise of technocracy, the concept and definition of technocracy, or the typologies of technocratic governments, the specific question of the relation between technocracy (and technocrats) and state transformations has been less explored. Through the study of the Italian case, we analyze the role of technocrats in three critical junctures (since the early 1980s to the present), and in light of the intertwined process of state transformation and neoliberalization. The paper thus provides for a long-term analysis of technocracy and the state, asking when, how, and in what conditions technocrats not only came to hold top-government positions, but also concurred to redefine intra-state institutional relations especially as regards the strengthening of executive power.

KEYWORDS: Technocracy; State Transformations; Italy; Expertise; Neoliberalism; Executive Power

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1. Introduction

The scientific literature concerned with the nature and the role of technocracy and technocrats is wide-ranging and has shed light on important – theoretical and empirical – aspects of this phenomenon. Academic works have analysed the consolidation of technocracy and expertise in contemporary society (Fischer 1990, 2009; Habermas 2015; Antonelli 2019), technocratic governments and the drivers of their formation (McDonnell & Valbruzzi 2014; Pastorella 2016; Wratil & Pastorella 2018), or the rule of technocrats in the European Union (Wallace & Smith 1995; Radaelli 1999; Scicluna & Auer 2019), this latter conceivable as the starkest case of a technocratic order (Giannone 2015). More recently, also hybrid forms of technocracy and populism, i.e. 'technopopulism', have been explored (Bickerton & Accetti 2021). Other works have called for a special attention to cases of 'technocrats in the state', shedding light on their role in specific critical junctures such as, in relation to the Italian case, the negotiations of the European Monetary Union during the early 1990s (Dyson & Featherstone 1996; see also Fabbrini & Donà 2003).

The aim of this study is reflecting upon the *agency* of technocrats in the state by (i) exploring the relation between technocracy and the transformations of the Italian state, while also (ii) paying particular attention to processes of neoliberal economic reform. In strict relation to these points, this work also aims to outline a more dynamic conceptualisation of technocrats as groups of individuals – a 'collective intellectual' (Cozzolino 2021) – that express ideas, interests and values (Lastrico 2015), and translate them into policy and political relations more broadly.

The analysis is carried on in a long-term perspective and zooms in on what we call '*technocracy-in-action*' in three fundamental critical junctures of Italian history: (i) the early 1980s; (ii) the early 1990s; (iii) and 2011–12[1]. These critical junctures are characterized by a deep economic and political crisis. Importantly, while in general terms 'phases of emergency strengthen monocratic figures' and can even change 'the form of State' (Musella 2021, 12 ss.), on the other hand they can also open a

[1] Also meaningful, albeit falling out of the analytical spectrum, is the recent establishment of a new technocratic government in Italy (the Draghi government, February 2021) in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. This testifies of the relevance of the 'technocratic alternative' in phases of emergency.

window of opportunity to modify the status quo and legitimate the establishment of technocratic governments by way of derogation from ordinary political party relations.

Compared to the existing literature, this study stands out for several elements. In the first place, we begin with a conceptualization of the state as a *terrain* of political agency and conflict; a terrain in which technocrats became one of the driving forces behind long-term processes of state transformations. In relation to this aim, another element of our study is the adoption of a long-term perspective. Through an in-depth analysis of specific critical junctures, the paper offers a diachronic study of technocratic agency, and shows how – and under what conditions – technocrats concurred to modify the balance of power within state institutions and legitimate processes of neoliberal economic reform.

In specific relation to state institutions, the paper also emphasises the *role of technocrats* in the strengthening of executive power in Italy. The Italian case has been aptly defined as a unique situation of transition from democracy to democracy (Musella 2019), namely from a political system dominated by the Parliament to one dominated by the executive, in which the Parliament came to retain a marginal policy-making role (Cozzolino 2021). In the light of this process, we argue that technocratic governments, especially in the first half of the 1990s, played a key role in transforming the state by fostering a process of presidentialization (Musella 2021).

The last element worth noting concerns the question of *constitutional change*. While the Italian Constitution recognises the centrality of the Parliament and its legislative and policy-making role (an institutional configuration actually ruling until the early 1990s), the gradual shift of decision-making power from the Parliament to the executive (i) altered the balance of power between state institutions as stipulated in the Constitution, (ii) and occurred without formal constitutional reforms (Calise 2005; Musella 2021). Crucially, if this element generally signals that such reconfiguration happened mainly via *practical* intra-institutional relations, this paper aims to shed light on the role of technocracy in this dynamic.

The article is organized as follows. The following section deals with the conceptualisation of the state and of state transformations. Subsequently, we offer a brief analytical framework of technocracy and technocratic governments. The section number four analyses 'technocracy-in-action': we focus on the three historical windows in which technocrats concurred to redefine intra-state relations and policy: (i) the early 1980s; (ii) the early 1990s; (iii) 2011–12. In section number five we provide for a broader reflection about the overall conditions that led technocrats to have such a relevant position within the neoliberal hegemony in Italy. The conclusions, eventually, discuss some limitations of this study and put forth a possible new research agenda revolving around a more dynamic understanding of technocratic agency.

2. Opening up the state, framing state transformations

A theoretical reflection about 'technocracy-in-action', and the contribution of technocrats to processes of institutional change, necessarily needs to begin with a more compelling understanding of the state and of state transformations. A dynamic conceptualisation of the state allows both 'to grapple with the decisive problem of *internal contradictions within the State*' (Poulantzas 1978, 131) and understanding technocracy as a special force *in* the state.

Theorising the state implies, analytically, to try to uncover the different layers and phenomena encompassed by the very concept of state (Barrow 1993, 10), and to identify the sources of state transformation. This step is particularly relevant for several reasons. The first of these is to avoid the trap of reification, namely looking at the state as a static 'thing', something that possesses its own 'will' (for a critique of such assumptions see Mitchell 1991). In other words, it is regarded as an autonomous and homogenous *unit* in society, capable to trigger coherent processes of change from above, while being also deprived of internal contradictions and conflicts – in their turn reflecting broader contradictions and conflicts occurring in society as a whole (for a discussion see Cozzolino 2021, chapter 2).

This kind of assumption bears a twofold analytical problem: on the one hand, it neglects the societal sources of state power; on the other, it renders increasingly difficult to understand the state as a dynamic terrain of political agency. In what follows, given our attention to technocracy as a force of change in the state, we concentrate especially on this second *problematique*.

A fundamental analytical step to understand the state and state transformations is to open up the 'state box' and conceptualize it as a terrain of political struggles and interactions among competing groups, with their own hegemonic projects and programmes. On the other hand, the state is a dynamic field that changes over time: not only in light of broader processes of change that occur in society (globalization, mediatization of politics, introduction of new technologies and so on) and that are *refracted* in and through state powers, but also thanks to political agency *in* the state. In other words, organized groups operating within state institutions may favour the redefinition of intra-state institutional relations and state reforms that can alter formal constitutional powers and relations – even without legal changes to the constitution. The strengthening of executive powers and so-called independent agencies (Cozzolino 2019) vis-à-vis representative institutions like the Parliament is a case in point (Musella 2019, 2021). And yet, a still open question is understanding what role technocrats played in this process.

As we argue below, technocracy does matter in processes of state transformations and policy change. But, before entering into a detailed analysis of such dynamics, here we put forth a conceptualisation of technocracy as a highly peculiar force in the state, usually operating within institutions such as central Banks (as the Bank of Italy, in our case), ministries of economy and finance, and independent agencies. This force, by drawing strength and legitimation by expertise and "technical" knowledge, can be able to influence the policy process and, to a relevant extent, inter-institutional relations. In specific relation to the Italian case, we show that – especially since the 1980s – technocrats were key both to the neoliberal restructuring of the country and to state transformations. In the next section, we introduce the concept of technocracy and put forth a more dynamic conception of techno-

cratic groups as force of change in the state, also paying attention to the relation between technocracy and neoliberalism.

3. Technocracy and technocratic governments in the neoliberal age

In general terms, technocracy is 'the exercise of power based on expertise' (Meynaud 1965, 28), namely specialized skills and knowledge that allow experts and technocrats to advocate efficient and 'right' solutions to resolve societal problems. As Sarfatti Larson (1972-73, 5) pointed out, 'the experts' role becomes technocratic only when it is inserted at high levels of responsibility in a public or private apparatus of power'. In this line of reasoning, Meynaud noted that 'when he [*sic*] becomes a technocrat, the expert becomes political' (1964, 262, quoted in McDonnell & Valbruzzi 2014, 657). These last points are useful to differentiate between 'technicians, those who through training and expertise are given the management of a part of the administrative apparatus, *under the direction of other elites,* and technocrats, who do enjoy autonomy within their areas of expertise and may influence non-technical decisions' (Centeno 1993, 310). In an ideal typical definition, technocrats are a 'state elite […] that seek[s] to impose a single, exclusive policy paradigm based on the application of instrumentally rational techniques' (Id., 314).

The latter point highlights the existence of an implicit tension between democracy and technocracy, which emerges especially in times of crisis of democracy (Antonelli 2019). Various authors investigated the reasons for the crisis of liberal democracy, dating back it at least to the 1970s (Crozier et al. 1975). For instance, according to Norris and Inglehart (2019), the silent revolution in values brought about by the advent of post-industrial society and the rise of neoliberalism triggered a backlash which fueled support for authoritarian-populist parties, thus endangering liberal democracy. On the other hand, the belief in people's aspirations for a strong democracy has been also greatly diminished: some studies have indeed shown that the main objective of citizens is a non-conflictual democracy (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002). In this respect, the intrinsic strength of technocracy, and the source of its legitimation, lies in its (apparent) objective, technical and neutral knowledge,

which may lead to a non-conflictual decision-making, alternative to the authoritarian-populist one. And yet, more realistically, 'professionals have all too often served the ideological function of legitimating decisions made elsewhere by political rather than scientific means' (Fischer 2009, 4).

Before exploring the specific kind of hegemony exerted by technocrats, it is preliminary worth offering a conceptual clarification of the question of technocratic governments, relevant especially in relation to Italy. As a matter of fact, with four technocratic governments since the early 1990s to the present coronavirus crisis, the Italian case is one of the starkest examples of technocratic agency in the state.

Albeit generally representing only a small component of post-World War II overall governments in Europe, technocratic governments constitute a highly relevant case of experts in core executive positions. Following the definition and classification of McDonnell and Valbruzzi (2014, 656), a technocratic government is such when (I) major governmental decisions are not made by elected party officials; (II) policy is not decided within parties which then act cohesively to enact it; (III) the highest officials (ministers, prime ministers) are not recruited through party. At the same time, technocratic governments can be distinguished between *full* technocratic governments when these are composed only by technocratic (i.e. non-party) figures, and *technocratic-led* governments when (1) the prime minister is a technocrat[2]; (2) the majority of ministers are technocrats; (3) they have a mandate to change the status quo (McDonnell & Valbruzzi 2014, 662–64).

Another important question is also to understand the conditions that favour the formation of technocratic (or technocratic-led) governments. Adopting a comparative perspective, Wratil and Pastorella (2018) found that the formation of such governments mainly occurs in moments of crisis, which can be mainly linked either to political scandals, which erode the legitimation of existing parties, or to economic recessions, when harsh economic policies are enacted to (supposedly) re-

[2] In turn, a Prime Minister is a technocrat when he/she has never held public office under the banner of a political party; is not a formal member of any party; is publicly recognised to possess non-party political expertise which is directly relevant to the role occupied in government (2014, 657–58).

cover the economy. Finally, in the formation of technocratic executives, political parties seem to retain a central role in: agreeing to form a technocratic government may be interpreted as a "survival strategy' used by potential formateur parties to shirk electoral responsibility and re-establish their credibility and that of their policies' (Wratil & Pastorella 2018, 451).

Taxonomies usefully provide for additional conceptual rigour to understand technocracy, yet they also bear the risk to limit the relevance of technocracy as a form of autonomous political agency and ideology in contemporary democracies. While a full-blown theoretical discussion of technocracy falls out of the scope of this study (on this see Lastrico 2015), here it is important to remark the type of hegemony exerted by technocrats, and its relation to processes of neoliberalization. With Meynaud (1965), we contend that technocracy is not a form of negation of politics: neutral and 'objective' solutions to societal issues cannot exist without connection to partisan values, ideas, and interests. Thus, technocracy is, first of all, a form of depoliticised political discourse based on the 'competence' and 'skills' of experts, which veils the partisan nature of policy choices. On the other hand, we also maintain that technocrats are groups of individuals that not only express ideas and worldviews and even political projects, but also that, from within state institutions, exercise a degree of political agency. It is here that our analysis intervenes: by exploring three critical junctures, we argue that technocrats (and technocratic governments) are not only a card put on the table by presidents or parties during a scandal or a recession, but a 'collective intellectual' (in the state) expressing forms of political and policy agency.

Crucially, the political strategy (and legitimation) rooted into technocratic logic is variously tied, theoretically, to neoliberalism, and, historically, to processes of neoliberalization and state transformations.

Concerning the first point, as Will Davies pointed out (2014, 18), neoliberalism can be conceived as 'an attempt to replace political judgement with economic evaluation'. This involves the replacement of the pursuit of 'justice' with 'the calculated maximization of efficiency […] as the test of legitimate action' (Id., 148). Effi-

ciency is best implemented through depoliticized forms of public policy and de-democratized forms of decision-making (Burnham 1999; Moini 2015). In this view, technocracy represents one of the three possible modes of depoliticized neoliberal governance,[3] through which an attempt is made to limit the room for manoeuvre of democratic politics in favour of a technocratic management which is (more) able to present 'the normativity of economic evaluation […] as a quasi-constitutional template for the state' (Davies 2014, 148).

Concerning the second point, rather being 'value-neutral', technocrats' policy choices are straightforwardly neoliberal-oriented, directed to strengthen the scope of markets in several domains (monetary and fiscal policy, labour market and wages) while reducing public expenditures (e.g. McDonnell & Valbruzzi 2014, 663). In more institutional terms, we show that technocrats in the state promoted processes of centralization and insulation of decision-making, mostly by strengthening the core executive (Cozzolino 2021, chapter 4). Therefore, neoliberalization and *executivization* are two intertwined processes, and both put in serious question the shape of representative democracy. But also, importantly, technocrats provided for additional legitimation to unpopular reforms especially during phases of economic crisis and emergency. For all these reasons, we see technocrats not only as an option in difficult times, but as a group that, in specific conditions, dynamically and in various forms takes part into the political process.

[3] Depoliticization can be conceived as a highly political governing strategy, which aims to camouflage the political nature of decision-making, through three different (but not alternative) forms: A) the governance by expertise, consisting of the reassignment of government tasks to 'non-political' bodies, such as the European Central Bank, or the placement of technocrats in government; B) the governance by numbers, that is the adoption of measures ostensibly to increase the accountability, transparency and external validation of public policies (Supiot 2011; Desrosieres 2015; Rottenburg et al. 2015); C) the governance by law, based on the acceptance of external binding 'rules' which limit government room for manoeuvre (Burnham 1999; for a detailed discussion see Giannone 2019, chapter 2).

4. Technocracy-in-action: the role of technocrats in critical historical junctures

Several elements make the Italian political and institutional system a privileged perspective to understand technocracy in more dynamic terms. First of all, technocrats have played a fundamental role in domestic policy-making since the collapse of Fascism and the establishment of the Republic, as the key figure of Luigi Einaudi (governor of the post-war Bank of Italy and later on President of the Republic) testifies (Masini 2019). Importantly, technocrats provided discursive resources that, in various critical moments of recent history, legitimated processes of change, often supplying to the party system and even to liberal political culture (Amyot 2004). The most interesting factor is the transition of leading technocratic figures through different roles in state's apparatuses, from technocratic ones (mostly the Bank of Italy) to the government.

In what follows, through a narrative analysis we explore three critical junctures that brought to the fore the role of technocrats in the state, thus retracing the key stages of such process since the 1980s. Following Capoccia and Keleman, we conceive critical junctures as 'relatively short periods of time during which there is a substantially heightened probability that agents' choices will affect the outcome of interest' (2007, 348)[4]. Such periods open 'macro-windows of opportunity' (Keeler 1993) for powerful political actors to change the status quo, and trigger new path-dependent processes and new institutional equilibria. In the case of this study, while we conceive the early 1990s as *the* critical juncture that favoured both the reconfiguration of the state and a massive neoliberal policy programme (Giannone & Cozzolino 2021), we re-trace the role of technocrats in the early 1980s to show the historical consolidation and role of this force in the state. Thus, we zoom in on three main critical junctures:

[4] More specifically, 'critical junctures are characterized by a situation in which the structural (that is, economic, cultural, ideological, organizational) influences on political action are significantly relaxed for a relatively short period, with two main consequences: the range of plausible choices open to powerful political actors expands substantially and the consequences of their decisions for the outcome of interest are potentially much more momentous' (Capoccia & Keleman 2007, 343).

1. The late 1970s and early 1980s, which were marked by high inflation rates and, above all, a heightened cycle of political and social conflicts (Aldo Moro, the President of Christian Democracy, was kidnapped and killed by the Red Brigades in 1978). Technocrats *entered* into the political conflict through changing the monetary policy of Italy.

2. The early 1990s, with the crisis of the Lira and the democratic and economic crisis of the First Republic[5], is the main critical juncture and is marked by both a political scandal and an economic crisis.

3. The years 2011-12, with the crisis of the sovereign debt – following the global financial crisis of 2008 – and the harsh neoliberal and austerity policy introduced thereafter, even through a modification of the constitution.

The next section is divided in three parts, each dedicated to a crisis in the state.

4.1. Manoeuvring in the state: technocrats in Italy in the 1980s

The 1980s can be conceived as a critical decade for the intertwined dynamic of state transformation and early processes of neoliberalization. In this phase several policy-makers, state representatives, and technocrats laid the foundations for the major changes occurred in the early 1990s, when technocrats achieved top-government positions and led the process of neoliberal restructuring. This moment is therefore fundamental to comprehend the epistemic, institutional and policy rupture that consolidated in the following decades. Here we argue that technocrats in the state exerted an autonomous political initiative aimed at depoliticising monetary policy by fostering the independence of the Bank of Italy (BoI).

Therefore, to understand this key historical moment is necessary to look at some critical policy choices of two institutions: the Bank of Italy and, to a lesser extent, the Treasury.[6] In the early 1980s, both of these promoted a fundamental re-

[5] This is linked to the investigation 'Mani Pulite' (Clean Hands) and the slaughters of the Mafia.

[6] Let us note that while the state is globally a terrain of political agency, such terrain is *uneven*. This is to say that some branches in the state are directly exposed to popular-societal pressures, interests and conflicts, while others are more secluded from direct influence. If the Parliament and, to a lesser ex-

form of the monetary policy of the country, coupled with a process of centralization of policy-making concerning state budget and fiscal policy. But before shedding light on such changes, it is worth reflecting first of all on the Italian 'technocratic collective intellectual', especially in relation to the BoI.

Historically the BoI owned a 'near monopoly of specialized economic knowledge' for 'it has been by far the most important think tank and research centre in the economic field in Italy' (Quaglia 2005, 549). Such specialized knowledge was clearly influenced by neoclassical economics and monetarism, on the rise since the late 1970s and everywhere tied to central banks[7] and neoliberal counterrevolution. On the other hand, several elements put the BoI at the forefront of neoliberal reform: the quasi monopoly of expertise, the reputation of the Bank, and crucially, the fact that 'foreign authorities and international organizations often regarded this institution as their best or only resource in Italy for economic data and analysis of economic policy' (ibid., 550). This last factor – the international dimension – is particularly relevant. Top-officials in the BoI were all trained (especially at PhD level) in leading international universities of the U.S. and UK, therefore 'importing' in Italy the latest advances in neoclassical/neoliberal political economy, showing also the transnational nature of neoliberalism on the other (ibid.).

In policy terms, the BoI, alongside with the Treasury, enacted – in 1981 – one of the most important reforms of monetary policy ever occurred in Italy. Such reform, the so-called 'divorce', was neither debated in the Parliament nor passed by a law. It happened overnight through a mere exchange of letters between the head of the BoI of the time, Carlo Azeglio Ciampi (later on Prime Minister in the first technocratic government of Italy), and the Minister of Treasury Beniamino Andreatta. In short, before 1981 the Bank purchased all the Treasury bonds that were not subscribed by private investors (through monetary base creation), while after that reform the BoI became *de facto* independent from the Treasury, and accordingly

tent, the government are examples of institutions more exposed to grassroots pressures, central banks are the paradigm of institutions way more insulated from democratic political forces – even in cases as the Italian, when the Bank was constitutionally bound to Treasury decisions.

[7] The case of the U.S. Federal Reserve under the direction of Paul Volcker is a case in point (see Harvey 2005, 23).

from political authorities. After the 'neo-liberal divorce' – according to Gualmini and Schmidt (2014, 352) – the BoI 'ceased to be the buyer of last resort of unsold government bonds and direct controls on credit and administrative obligations were dismantled in favour of a more market-oriented regulation'.

The new autonomy of the Bank produced enormous change in the monetary constitution of Italy (Graziani 1998; Cozzolino 2021, chapter 4). Generally, it favoured a non-accommodating policy towards wage-earners through curbing inflation regardless to unemployment level and recessive turns; set the stage for the fiscal policy of permanent balanced budget (permanent austerity), thereafter *the* imperative of Italian macroeconomic policy especially from the 1990s (Cozzolino 2020); finally, it allowed for the systematic resort to global financial credit markets to finance government expenditures. This last element, linked to the rise of real interest rates in the 1980s, produced a general increase in the level of government debt, while also improved the overall influence of international creditors on Italy's macroeconomic policy.

This reform was the pivot of several other important changes occurring in the state, which 'prepared' the imposition of neoliberal policy and permanent fiscal retrenchment. Here it is important to stress especially the centralization of budget procedures, which slipped away from the Parliament to fall into the aegis of the executive-Treasury complex (Ferrera & Gualmini 2004, 61). Through the new autonomy of the BoI, the growing centralization of fiscal policy and budget, and the marginalization of Parliament's policy-making role, the 1980s saw a series of fundamental while incremental movements of state transformations, setting the stage for the early 1990s broader transition.

4.2. Technocrats in government and neoliberal reforms in the 1990s

If the 1980s were a phase of incremental changes, the role of technocrats was indeed crucial in the early 1900s, which can be conceived as the critical juncture for realization of the premises laid down in the previous decade.

The overall context of deep emergency characterising Italy in the early 1990s opened a macro-window of opportunity for technocrats to achieve top-government positions. The crisis was twofold: a political scandal and an economic recession. In greater detail, in 1992 Italy was hit by an intertwined set of international and domestic crises, this also in the background of the key negotiations of the European Monetary Union (EMU) since 1990, which further empowered technocrats in the state (Dyson & Featherstone 1996).

Starting with the international dimension, since the 1980s the Italian economy was increasingly dependent on foreign creditors, and public debt started to rising especially due to growing interest rates (Graziani 1998). In this situation, a speculative financial attack pushed Italy to abandon the European Monetary System in 1992, causing at the same time a further rise in the public debt (skyrocketing to 121 percent on GDP in 1994, it was 56 percent in 1980) and the devaluation of the Lira. Such context of enduring emergency pushed political authorities to assure international creditors about the *credibility* of the Italian economic programme, especially via technocratic governments and the commitment to fiscal austerity and neoliberalizing measures.

In specific relation to domestic politics, the early 1990s witnessed to an abrupt and unique breakdown in the national political system. The triggering element of the political crisis was the scandal known as *Tangentopoli* ('Bribesville'), a network of corruption practices involving two of the main parties of the time, the Christian Democracy and the Italian Socialist Party, which were substantially downsized thereafter. Alongside the demise of the Italian Communist Party (the other larger party of that period) after the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989) and of the Soviet Union (1991), in the space of a few months the party system changed radically, with the old Republican parties wiped out and new parties entering the scene, especially Berlusconi's Forza Italia, the Northern League, and the post-Communist Democratic Party of the Left. Also, the structure of the political system changed, with the transition from a proportional electoral system to a mostly majoritarian one, thus favouring the formation of grand coalitions in the name of (since then never reached) po-

litical stability. Importantly, all these changes marked the transition from the First to the Second Italian Republic.

In the political vacuum left by *Tangentopoli*, and in the background of both the international financial emergency and the advanced phase of European integration (with the negotiations and then the signature of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992), technocrats found a window of opportunity, within the government, to introduce fundamental neoliberal reforms in a very short amount of time. In 1992, Giuliano Amato (a former Law professor) led an *ad interim* government that soon after was substituted, in 1993, by a technocratic government led by the former governor of the Bank of Italy, Carlo Azeglio Ciampi. After a short-lived centre-right executive led by Silvio Berlusconi, the second technocratic government of this period was established in 1995, and was led by another former top-member of the BoI, Lamberto Dini. Here we aim to stress in particular two elements: the first is the resort by these governments to decree laws and extraordinary legal measures, the second concerns their policy choices.

In relation to the question of decree laws, this is a crucial element to understand the progressive empowerment of executive powers (a key factor in the transformation of the state), and how early-1990s governments were fundamental actors in such process. As showed elsewhere (Cozzolino 2019, 2021), the decrees enacted by the executive skyrocketed between 1992 and 1996, altering the balance of power between state institutions especially at the expenses of parliamentary autonomous policy role. The number of decrees enacted in this period is unparalleled in the entire history of the Republic (for a general overview see Cozzolino, 2021 chapter 6). Crucially, while the Italian Constitution clearly stipulates that decree laws (also labelled 'emergency legislation') must be enacted only in extraordinary cases of necessity and urgency (art. 77), from these years onwards such emergency legal tools started to be used systematically, thus circumventing the Constitution and becoming *de facto* ordinary instruments to implement policy. Ordinary law, namely the law originating in the Parliament, begun to decline thereafter and today accounts only for a marginal source of policy-making.

The transformation of the state through the empowerment of the executive – vis-à-vis an ever-increasing marginal role of the Parliament – is the counterpart of the processes of neoliberalization. In short, in the space of a few years technocratic governments enacted – through decree – a series of neoliberalizing measures concerning privatization, pension system, labour market, industrial relations, and budget consolidation (McDonnell & Valbruzzi 2014; Cozzolino 2021, 72–73; Fazi 2021). For instance, in 1993 the Ciampi government passed a key reform in labour market concerning the modification of the collective bargaining system in order to pursue income and anti-inflationary policy. Also important is the reform of the electoral system, which changed from a proportional to a mainly majoritarian one to favour the introduction of a bi-polar political regime (legitimated by its improved stability, despite the reduction in the spectrum of political representation). But the 1990s were also a moment of intense austerity therapy: cuts in state budget were the leitmotif of this period, when governments of all political orientations passed several fiscal adjustment measures aimed to achieve surplus in state budget while also decreasing public debt and interest rates. The same discourse applies to Dini government, which continued on the pathway of economic restructuring especially in relations to pension and wage deflation, along with the policy of permanent fiscal consolidation (Table 1).

Table 1 - Technocratic governments and economic policy

Governments	Economic Policy
Ciampi government (1993–1994)	Reform of the collective bargaining system; public administration reforms; wage controls; adoption of a legal framework for supplementary pensions; electoral system reform
Dini government (1995–1996)	Introduction of a flexible retirement age; shift to a contribution-related formula for pensions; indexation of pensions to real wage growth; deficit cuts

Source: McDonnell and Valbruzzi (2014, 663).

The 1990s can be conceived as the phase of consolidation of neoliberal and austerity therapy and discourse, within a process of deep reconfiguration of the state. Such schema, as we argue in next paragraph, is reproduced also in the background of another financial crisis, that of 2011.

4.3. Back to the future: state of emergency and technocrats in 2011

The resort to technocratic governments was not just limited to the early 1990s. Actually, the critical juncture of the early 1990s, thanks to the agency of technocrats in the state, triggered a path-dependent process characterised by (i) the centralization of decision-making power, (ii) permanent austerity and neoliberalization (Cozzolino 2020). Above all, it created a historical precedent whereby the option of a technocratic government, under specific conditions, is always a possibility – as also testified by the actual technocratic government led by Mario Draghi (2021). The case of the formation of the technocratic government led by Mario Monti (2011–13) deserves particular attention for the conditions in which it occurred, and the consequences in institutional and policy terms.

The Great Crisis of 2008 hit hard Western economies, leaving long-lasting scars especially to those countries characterised by high public debt and slow

growth rates. Actually, among the consequences of the global financial crisis, the growth of public debts and budget deficits (mostly due to automatic stabilizers and discretional financial intervention aimed to sustain the economic activity) were the most visible effects alongside economic recession. This situation soon led, only two years after (2010), to the crisis of sovereign debts. Portugal, Ireland, Spain, Greece and Italy were all hit by a crisis of international trust by credit markets about the sustainability of their public debts, in the background of the rapid worsening of their economic performance. Italy was at the forefront of this situation being one of the largest economies in the Eurozone and given the entity of its public debt. The immediate effect of this crisis was the growth of interest rates, in turn leading (as seen in the early 1990s) to a further rise in public debt.

The birth of the technocratic government led by Mario Monti needs to be understood in this context of financial emergency and increasing pressures exerted by both international financial markets and European institutions (Sacchi 2015; Moschella 2017), coupled with a shared distrust in the right-wing government of the time led by Silvio Berlusconi. It is also worth mentioning that in August 2011 the president of the European Central Bank Jean-Claude Trichet, together with his anointed successor Mario Draghi, sent a secret letter to the Berlusconi government. The letter urged Italian government to take immediate action and implement a programme of structural (i.e. neoliberal) reforms and austerity measures to reassure international creditors about the 'virtuous' pathway of recovery undertaken by Italy[8]. Interestingly, the letter pushed Italian authorities to enact such measure *by decree,* thus explicitly suggesting circumventing parliamentary scrutiny and discussion. Second, and even more importantly, the letter recommended *reforming the constitution* in order to make more stringent budgetary rule – an explicit commitment to permanent austerity.

[8] The policy program envisaged by the letter comprised liberalization of public services and privatizations; a widespread strategy of fiscal consolidation through direct cuts in budget expenditures, pension reform, a new mechanism aimed at reduce *automatically* state expenditures when the deficit level exceeds the prearranged level; reform of the collective bargaining system from central to firm level, in order to adjust salaries and working conditions to the 'specific necessity of enterprises'; reform labor law to facilitate dismissals (for a broader discussion see Giannone 2015, 112–116; Cozzolino 2021, 137–38).

Just a few months after this letter was sent, the change in the government occurred. In short, a series of pressures coming from financial markets and European institutions led the President of the Italian Republic of the time, Giorgio Napolitano, to push Silvio Berlusconi to resign. Napolitano masterminded the operation of the change in the government through appointing Mario Monti – former Dean of the private university Bocconi, former EU commissioner, and prominent neoclassical economist since the 1980s – first as 'senator for life', and then as Prime Minister in November 2011, holding also the position of Minister of Economy and Finance. Crucially, Monti executive 'quickly adopted the ECB letter - and the structural reforms it prescribed - as its roadmap' (Sacchi 2015, 85).

As for the technocratic governments of the 1990s, also in this case we pay attention both to the political-institutional dimension and policy measures. Starting with the first dimension, it is worth preliminary noting that the very creation of the Monti government amounted to an important twist of formal constitutional procedures. Actually, this government was 'born neither with the official declaration of the government crisis and the early end [of the legislature], nor with the calling for regular elections to attain the formation of new government' (Calvano 2014, 7). Another important aspect of the establishment of this technocratic government was the unprecedented political involvement of the President of the Republic – which, as already noted, masterminded the entire operation leading to the formation of the Monti executive.

Following the pattern established with the governments of the early 1990s, also the Monti executive soon resorted (and brought to the next level) to several extraordinary legal measures (Criscitiello 2021). Besides the unprecedented resort to decree laws, Monti government activated another instrument to put under strain the Parliament, that is, the so-called confidence question[9] (see Cozzolino 2019, 345–47

[9] The confidence question, introduced in 1988 (Law No. 400) to strengthen executive power vis-à-vis the Parliament, can be brought by the cabinet to the Parliament with respect to key bills, so as to reduce the risk of a parliamentary rejection. In this case, the executive advises its parliamentary majority to call for new elections in case of a negative vote on the bill covered by the confidence question. At the same time, this legal mechanism serves to fast-track the approval of the specific bill, re-

for a more detailed overview). The effect of the joint and systematic use of decree laws and confidence question was a further important reduction of the role and autonomy of the Parliament as regards policy-making and amending power. Yet, despite the escalation in the activation of such extraordinary and exceptional powers, maybe the key measure passed by the Monti executive is the reform of the Constitution. Voted in 2012 by a large coalition (spanning both the centre-left and right) of parties, this reform introduced in the Constitution the principle of the balanced budget and of the 'sustainability' of government debt (art. 81), and was legitimated as the domestic application of the European Fiscal Compact. This reform, in contrast with key principles of the Italian Constitution – which stipulates, among other things, the primacy of labour (art. 1), the right to work (art. 4 and 35), the right to a fair remuneration (art. 36), a socially oriented economy (art. 41) –, imposed, even on symbolic terms, the neoliberal principle of the permanent fiscal restraint. In relation to the specific policy measures, this government followed a pathway of harsher neoliberalization processes: reform of labour market and pension, cuts in budget expenditures, automatic fiscal adjustment through increases in the VAT tax, the already mentioned reform of the Constitution, and so on.

The experience of the technocratic executive born in 2011 is significant in several respects: the continuities in the international political economy dimension (i.e., crises and tensions on credit markets); the resort to exceptional measures to compress the role of political forces in the Parliament and silence political dissent (also outside of the Parliament); the acceleration on the pathway of neoliberalization. However, this executive was also characterised by a strong decisionist approach, a blatant distrust for unions and policy negotiations among social parties, and a direct monitoring and surveillance of EU institutions. The next paragraph discusses the role and consequences of technocracy in Italy from the perspective of state transformations.

ducing the time allocated for discussion and thus for the amending power of parliamentary forces to potentially be exercised (Cozzolino 2019, 346).

5. Technocracy as a force in the state. Insights from the Italian case

The article has sought to provide for an overview, by looking at three critical junctures, of the role of technocrats in fostering processes of reconfiguration of state powers and policies in Italy. We started our examination by remarking that the state is not a closed, static and homogenous unity/thing, but a stratified field of political conflicts and interactions (which in their turn occur within a broader societal structure crossed by many other socio-political conflicts) carried-on by different political forces *in* the state. Also, we argued that *within* the state as a terrain of political action, technocracy is part and parcel of political and policy processes – a factor which can also lead, and actually led, to the reconfiguration of intra-state institutional relations. Now, it is possible to say something more as regards what we called 'technocracy-in-action' and the reconfiguration of the state.

First of all, we understand technocracy as a force in the state with its own purposes and autonomy of action. On the other hand, we already argued that the construction of market economy is possible thanks to the mobilization of state executive powers. This argument implies two main consequences. First, the state and market economy enjoy an internal relation; accordingly, neoliberalism, as the dominant economic theory of the last phase of capitalism, is also a 'state form' as it constitutes a project to construct, adjust and reconfigure a specific 'state formation' (Giannone 2019), and in which state actors (as the technocrats) are critical factors in the construction both of market economy and state policies (Cahill 2014). In this regard, for instance, we are at odds with those views of an abrupt change in the state between the 1980s and 1990s, whereby 'although in the 1980s some neo-liberal policy ideas were indeed adopted [...] were mostly focused on using the state to reform the rules for business and labour [...]. It was not until the 1990s that the state came to be viewed as the problem, not the solution' (Gualmini & Schmidt 2014, 325). Actually, if we look at the state as a terrain of political action, between the two periods there are important *continuities* in the mobilization of state powers to reform social relations, regardless to how the state is conceived and its reform legitimated politically. Elsewhere, drawing on Gramsci's lexicon, we conceptualised the 1980s

as a phase of war of position, slow and incremental (an accumulation of political awareness and force), while the 1990s as a case of war of movement, fast and capable in a few months – and in the wake of a series of intertwined emergencies and crises – to improve significantly the reconfiguration of the state and, through augmented executive powers, introduce neoliberal reforms (Cozzolino 2021, 70).

The other fundamental point to be raised in relation to technocracy and the reconfiguration of the state concerns constitutional change. Even only briefly for reasons of space, we showed that technocratic governments can be characterised, compared to 'political governments', for a style of steering based on a more intense resort to emergency legal mechanisms and, accordingly, a minor inclination towards policy negotiation. While, on the one hand, this can be easily explained by the fact that technocrats, unlike politicians, are not linked to elections and electoral constituencies for the sake of their own reproduction as a professional class, on the other hand this has important practical consequences on the overall *constitutional relations between state powers*. As already noted, the empowerment of executive powers (especially in early 1990s) concurred (alongside with other very important factors as the discredit of political parties) to modify the balance of power among state institutions in favour of the government and at the expenses of the Parliament – the opposite direction of how prescribed by the Italian Constitution and the primacy assigned to legislative power. Thus, despite the absence of a constitutional reform that explicitly recognised a new – *presidential* – institutional asset of the Italian state, such 'great transformation' can be conceived as a *de facto* constitutional change in which technocrats played a fundamental role, also for the legitimation of this change. In fact, in relation to this last factor it is important to stress that the overall position of technocracy in Italy is favoured by the delegitimization of the political class, especially from the early 1990s, when this latter came to be associated to endemic corruption and self-interest (in the background of a parallel disempowerment of political ideologies). This factor allowed technocrats – viewed as pragmatic individuals capable to manage difficult situations thanks to their expertise and knowledge, and willing to modernise the state – to increase their legitimation vis-à-vis professional

politicians. In turn, to improve the legitimation of *neoliberal modernization* as a means to rescue the country from longstanding bureaucratic inertia and other problems linked to an inefficient political class. Therefore, especially in highly critical junctures – with a strong international dimension linked to credit markets, the process of European integration and the role of European institutions –, the technocratic card was put on the table both to legitimate deeply unpopular measures and to drive further processes of neoliberal restructuring of the state. In this view, technocracy can be conceived 'not so much [as] the attempt to provide a resolution of the economic crisis, as the attempt to resolve the political crisis of the state by trying to disengage the state politically from the economy so as to de-politicise economic policy formation' (Clarke 1990, 27).

The question of European integration also deserves a special mention. Of course, many scholars pointed that this process constituted a strong source of pressure for Italian authorities to reform the country and improve the overall performance of national institutions. While we agree that the EU can be conceived as an institutional constraint since its nature of 'rule of rules' (Scicluna & Auer 2019), we also emphasise the role of national policy-makers, and technocrats prominently (Dyson & Featherstone 1996), in discursively resorting to Europe to legitimate national change and reform the state. For example, elsewhere we showed that the early 1990s juncture is fundamental to understand the characteristics of the discursive order that, in the following decades, legitimated neoliberal reform, austerity policy and state transformations (also) by systematically resorting to Europe (Cozzolino 2020; Fazi 2021). A schema that clearly returned during the Monti executive, when European authorities strongly backed Monti's reform plan (Culpepper 2014).

6. Conclusions

In February 2021, Italy witnessed to the formation of a new technocratic government, led by the former President of the European Central Bank, Mario Draghi. Also in this case, an extraordinary situation of emergency favoured the

technocratic option, sign of what can be conceived as a now structural component of Italian politics (Fazi 2021).

In this paper we attempted to articulate several reflections concerning the relation between technocracy and state transformations, dovetailing this with historical insights from the Italian case. We tried to emphasise, in particular, the political and agential dimension of technocracy, and how this force in the state, far from being apolitical and neutral, has its own programme for change, and its own forms of political legitimation and discourse. A force that, from within the state, concurred in several occasions to redefine intra-state institutional power relations. A precondition the latter to impose ongoing processes of neoliberal restructuring.

On the other hand, this article constitutes a preliminary study for an all-encompassing research focused on technocracy in Italy. In this respect, for instance, more research is needed to explore the many shades of technocracy and its relevance in contemporary world: possible future avenues can include the analysis of the international dimension of technocracy as a transnational class of experts, and/or the interactions between international institutions – as the International Monetary Fund – and national technocrats. In relation to technocrats as a community of, in Gramscian terms, 'organic intellectuals', it would be of great interest for future research to explore further the biographies of prominent technocratic figures, and understand in greater detail the 'revolving doors' between state bureaucracies (like the BoI) or academia and the government, and likewise between European and national dimension.

From the perspective of democratic theory, it is still necessary to understand how technocracy and the rule of experts work (Caselli 2020), and how they have fundamentally impacted on the political structures of post-World War II national democracies, actually reducing the space for democratic-popular forces and preventing real alternatives to neoliberalism and austerity (as in the case of the EU order, see Giannone 2015). This is, for instance, an important step to understand the involution of mass democracies on the one hand, and the rise of populism on the other.

The relevance of technocracy in contemporary society is increasing in terms of political force and visibility, and studying this force in – and beyond – the state would further improve our understanding of contemporary politics and the (now endemic) crisis of democracy.

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