

Berlusconi turns off the light

Written by Pablo de Orellana and Alberto Campora

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PABLO DE ORELLANA AND ALBERTO CAMPORA, FEB 20 2011

The recent protests against Berlusconi on the occasion of his trial for sexual abuse are representative not only of dissent and opposition to his government, but also of the very nature of his political existence.[1] The Berlusconi phenomenon goes well beyond the attention and scandal derived from his sexual exploits and other antics. His constant references to ‘honesty’, ‘freedom’, ‘values’ and an obsession with communist takeover conspiracies might appear almost folkloric, but to accuse him of hypocrisy in his utilization of political discourse would be reductive. Berlusconi’s is not simply a media-dependent political phenomenon but rather a successful reconstruction of political space in his favour.

This paper explores the ways in which Berlusconi has reformed the parameters of possibility and discourse in Italian political space, effectively redefining its dynamics to such an extent that the realm of political possibility has become dominated by the sole acceptability of his own position. We shall briefly explore entrepreneurship and cultural development as brief cases to illustrate the vast and far-reaching, but less politically obvious, effects of the Berlusconi phenomenon upon Italian society.

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Berlusconi’s decade in power has witnessed a succession of political and social crises that will prove to be formative for Italy’s political future. Italy is now redefining, with the raucous accompaniment of the Lega Nord, its social and national identity: a process aggravated by social and regional division as well as a looming crisis fuelled by the discontent of students and unemployed graduates. These problems, their portrayal and subsequent reactions are intimately related to the dynamics of Berlusconi’s political discourse and its effectiveness.

The crux of Berlusconi’s political discourse is an identification of political identity that relies on a confrontation against an evil and pervasive ‘other’ as well as a defined set of values. It could be argued that Berlusconi has created a bipolar political dynamic with himself at one end and any critical voice at the other. This, we argue, is not only a powerful propaganda exercise but rather a qualification of knowledge and perception of the socio-political realm. Berlusconi’s practice of power is closely related to the occupation of the only permissible political space remaining: his own. In turn, it is the qualification of this political space that informs the practice of knowledge-forming and information.[2]

The Terms of Berlusconi’s discourse

First and most vociferous is the definition of most of his opponents as communist –the resulting discourse is reminiscent of the American 1950s Red Scare. In the 1950s and 1960s Italy did have a large and influential communist party, however, today the communist party does not hold any seats in Parliament. [3]

Communism, precisely because it had been an important political force during the cold war, has the potential for the formation of an identity division to the detriment of opposition. Berlusconi’s discursive practice equates opposition to communist conspiracy: the political opposition is labelled as ‘communist’, ‘Bolshevik’, ‘disloyal’, ‘unpatriotic’ and ‘Stalinist’.[4] The judges prosecuting him for a variety of crimes, including embezzlement, conflict of interests, corruption, fraud[5] and statutory rape are referred to as ‘toghe rosse’ (Red gowns) and ‘politicised red partisans’.[6] The shift in acceptability has even reached the universities, where opposition from educators has led Berlusconi to

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'finish off the generation of 1968'. The ghost of militant communism is kept alive by the very public hunt for former members of the Red Brigades,[7] thus reinforcing Berlusconi's socio-political dialectic opposition.

These terms and conceptualisation have found their way into general political discourse at all levels. Even his former right-wing ally, Gianfranco Fini, is now labelled as 'traitor' for his opposition to Il Cavaliere.[8] [9] The definition of identity is also based on identity conceptualisations based on old/new definitions and values. His own position, he argues, is the opposite of the 'corrupt politics of old', thus drawing on a contrast with the scandals of the 1980s and 1990s that saw a prime minister in exile for corruption and the unveiling of vast networks of bribery.[10] Edmott, however, argues that 'Silvio Berlusconi personifies the continuity of Bettino Craxi politics [...] his behaviour is clearly part of the 80/90's political system'.[11]

This is combined with a political definition based on values: 'freedom' versus 'red tyranny'; 'love' ('the party of love') versus 'hatred'.[12] This is not only a tactic of defamation as defined by the Italian intellectuals decrying the 'Politics of mud'.[13] We argue that it is the powerful and controlled displacement of the margins of political acceptability and thus the space for political dissent. This space has clearly become reduced by the association of dissent with the well-formed conceptualisation of perfect evil: communism. The unacceptability of association with communist phantoms is a powerful tool in veering the political reasoning of moderate and conservative voters. The space for political choice has been reduced to a rigged binary pre-established by Berlusconi. This has by now become a self-enforcing dynamic that has the effect of limiting the legitimacy of any opposition.

The displacement and dislocation of systemic understandings of economic, socio-political and cultural perception will probably continue beyond Berlusconi's lifetime. We now explore very briefly an economic and a cultural instance of such dislocation.

Entrepreneurship

In 1995 Berlusconi's socio-political image rested on his reputation as a wildly successful self-made entrepreneur.[14] To the present day, this favours faith in his economic capability in government. This was highly played up, for instance, as he personally took over the management of the reconstruction of L'Aquila after the earthquake to reassure the population as to a quick, incorruptible and efficient and reconstruction. The fostering of entrepreneurship, the backbone of Italy's highly dynamic and successful economy, has long been the promise of Berlusconi's 'Liberal Revolution'.[15]

The ability in economic governance of Italy's most successful entrepreneur is thus automatically drawn in contrast with its communist alternative.[16] However, the liberal revolution has failed to materialise in the last 17 years. Entrepreneurship has not been incentivised in the last decade[17] and 'difficulties in starting a business are clearly higher than in the other important economies'.[18] According to an EU study, Italy was the lowest-ranked (of Europe's 11 largest economies) in terms of taxes, financial environment and government incentives for new business.[19] Berlusconi has blamed this failure on 'communist culture'.[20]

Culture

Italy has long been a beacon for the development and practice of Western cultural life in all fields. Italian artists have made deep marks upon music, fine art and the performing arts. Today, however, the situation of Italian cultural life, including academia and tourism, is as unpromising as that of entrepreneurship.

First and most obvious are the political attacks that Berlusconi has brought onto many artists, performers and especially media figures -and TV channels not belonging to Mediaset- for their alleged political tendencies.[21] Intellectual space becomes thus limited and deeply reduced to non-critical and 'inoffensive' artistic and intellectual practice and media. Italian fine art is deeply indebted to and dependent upon private art patronage and a market that is much wider than that found in other countries; this most delicate market is in danger of collapsing from the political demonisation of art. Considering the extremely low institutional support to art this would entail a reduction in art activity in the country.

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The reduction of cultural and intellectual space in Italy is thus a very real and very latent danger and is compounded with lack of funding for research and employment for graduates. 300,000 highly educated Italians have left the country. Moreover 'a 2004 study found that, of all Italian emigrants, the share of those with degrees quadrupled between 1990 and 1998'.[22]

The reduction in the political acceptability of art is compounded with a dismal lack of attention by institutions to Italy's superlative historical and artistic patrimony. Not only are archaeological, artistic and historical sites badly tended to in comparison with France or Germany, but Mario Resca Director General for Cultural development and former McDonald's Italy CEO, has spearheaded deep cuts to culture and education (133.000 jobs and 8bn in the last 3 years in education alone[23]), further endangering Italy's cultural development. An OCSE review has recently criticised the situation of Italian tourism for the underdevelopment of infrastructure, public investment, cultural governance and policies and major projects.[24]

The End of Enlightenment

The future of Italy is focused on the past: on the past of politics, on the past of its politics, on past enemies. The legitimacy of current institutions such as opposing parties, media and even the judiciary is thrown into doubt through a cultural and political practice that limits the political and intellectual space for opposition and dissent leaving little room for legitimacy and acceptability.

This is achieved through a delimitation and redefinition of political space rendered possible not only by the potential for propaganda granted to Berlusconi by his vast media empire, but most importantly by the successful redefinition of opposition in the Italian political conscience. The results are yet to be fully recognized, but in the limited instances here explored it seems clear that development, progression, debate and evolution are in real danger. Moreover, the dignity and especially the legitimacy of Italian politics has been further undermined by the practice and perception of political representation as a free-for-all business: an alternative, if one has the right connections, to modelling, massaging and even legally entangled business. It is not surprising that Italy has one of Europe's highest election abstention rates.[25]

Kant defined enlightenment as the proliferation and cultivation of critique and reason as the vehicles to intellectual, cultural and political evolution: an ethos based not on any one body of knowledge but upon a constant critical interrogation of the present and of ourselves. Dissent, contradiction, argumentation and debate are key to the betterment of society through democracy. If this is true, Berlusconi has turned off the light.

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[1] 'I am the Jesus Christ of politics. I am a patient victim, I sacrifice myself for everyone.' – Berlusconi, 2006, at a campaign rally. All quotes in footnotes are Berlusconi's. Our translations.

[2] This is evidently facilitated by his overwhelming ownership and influence on publishing, newspapers and television

[3] <http://www.camera.it/46>

[4] 'Communists have now changed their dress codes, they wear luxury clothes. However, they still exist

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and we have to be aware of who has been part of a political movement that led millions of people to die'

Kallipera, Canale 5, 5th January 2011

[5] For an overview http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trials_involving_Silvio_Berlusconi

[6] 'I am not the anomaly in Italy. The anomaly are the communist judges and public prosecutors' *Repubblica*, 27 October 2007

[7] eg. *Corriere della Sera* 12 April 2010

[8] During one of his recent speech to his party he declared "Gianfranco Fini, is a traitor, who has planted the seed of division and given himself up to the left wing party" *Corriere Informazione*, February 2011.

[9] 'The only thing that unites the ex-communists and former fascist Italy is harming me [...] They are rescued by the politicized red gowns, ready to intervene whenever the situation demands it. Well, once again, this offensive has been and will be repulsed'. *La Repubblica*, 28th January, 2011

[10] 'Italy is now a great country to invest in... today we have fewer communists and those who are still there deny having been one' Speech at the New York Stock Exchange, 2003, *Life*, November 2010

[11] Bill Emmott, Lecture at the London School of Economics, 7th February 2011

[12] We want good to prevail over evil', 'Communists control everything ... we have to dispose of them, if not physically, then politically'. Portanova, M, *Il Partito dell'Amore*, Chiarelettere, (Milan, 2010)

[13] *Il Sole 24 Ore*, 8/9 November 2010

[14] To escape poverty, he suggested 'Do it my way and earn more money', *Life*, November 2010

[15] The Motto of his first party, Forza Italia, in the 1994 elections was 'For a true liberal revolution, a new Italian miracle'

[16] 'If I left the government the result would be misery, terror and death. A communist regime then, not the liberal revolution we want.' (2005) *Agora Vox*, 3rd of February 2011

[17] Heritage Report, 2010: EU Entrepreneurship Monitor, 2010

[18] Emmott, *Forza, Italia*, Rizzoli, (Milan, 2010)

[19] EU Entrepreneurship Monitor, 2008

[20] 'Italy is among the European countries where it is more difficult to do business and this is largely due to the communist culture that was dominant from the 70s and looks with suspicion at entrepreneurs. In communist culture, who does business is a crook, a fugitive, an exploitative by definition.' *La Repubblica*, 7th of February, 2011

[21] *La Repubblica*, 16 April 2010

[22] (OECD, cited in *The Economist*, January 2011)

[23] *La Repubblica*, 10 december 2010

[24] OCSE, Italian Tourism Policy, 2011

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[25] 36% in the last election, EU Observer, 30 march 2010