

one

Berlusconi: The Not-So-Irresistible Rise of a Media Dictator

On January 26, 1994, the media tycoon Silvio Berlusconi—owner of three private national TV networks, three cable channels, various newspapers and print media sources, as well as businesses in sectors ranging from cinema to advertising, from supermarkets to financial services, including AC Milan, the most famous soccer team in Italy—addressed the nation on all three of his national networks, announcing his decision to enter politics for the good of the country. Wearing a blue cardigan, alone at his desk, with a shelf of books behind him, he delivered an eight-minute speech that started with: “Italy is the country I love.” He told the national audience that he had to “take the field,” adopting the soccer metaphor to describe his entrance into politics, and asked all Italians to do the same—to take the field to build for themselves and their children a new Italian economic miracle.

Two weeks later, on February 6, 1994, at the first convention of *Forza Italia* [FI, Forward Italy]—another allusion to soccer, invoking the cheer for the national team, i.e., “Go Italy”—on a stage that looked like the creation of a science-fiction writer, with a giant screen behind him, his image surrounded by a blue halo, the biggest entrepreneur of Italian media declared to an ecstatic audience: “Coming here in the car, I thought I was a mad person going to meet other mad people.... You are so many here today.... Our madness is spreading.... The great Erasmus said that true wisdom does not come from reason but from a far-sighted, extraordinary madness.” He went on to say that only his crazy altruism had induced him to leave the world of business and dedicate himself to the public’s welfare. He had to save Italy from its

looming economic crisis and, above all, from the danger of a communist victory.

Berlusconi forgot to mention the fact that his immense holding company, Fininvest, was on the verge of financial breakdown due to the massive debt it had accumulated over the preceding decade. He did not mention that the parties of the center-left—which appeared ready to triumph—were talking openly about passing anti-trust measures that would have forced him to unload one or two of his national networks. He also forgot to mention that Fininvest was under investigation for paying political bribes in connection with the corruption scandal known as *Tangentopoli* [Kickback City], and that his good old friend Bettino Craxi (the socialist former prime minister indicted in 1993 for corruption) could no longer offer him political protection.

Rather than altruism, it was Berlusconi's fear of being prosecuted or forced to declare bankruptcy that prompted him to run for office. Berlusconi launched a campaign that took Italy by storm by combining telegenic charm, can-do entrepreneurial rhetoric and a confident smile. In a three-month televised marathon, Berlusconi brought to power the political alliance that he had founded and directed. In the March 1994 general elections, Forza Italia won the vote of a quarter of the electorate, becoming the party of relative majority. It had attracted most of the constituency that had previously supported the parties involved in the Tangentopoli scandal—the Christian Democracy, the Socialist Party and parts of the lay parties—but this was not enough to hold power. Forza Italia needed allies, and there was no shortage of them. One was the right-wing party *Alleanza Nazionale* [AN, National Alliance], the direct heir of *Movimento Sociale Italiano* [MSI, Italian Social Movement], the party that after World War II collected those nostalgic for the rule of Benito Mussolini. The other ally was the *Lega Nord* [LN, Northern League], led by Umberto Bossi, the expression of social aggressiveness and tax rebellion of the localist classes of Northern Italy, who, though taking advantage of the economic effects of globalization, did not want to accept the social costs of immigration. With these allies, plus a tiny party derived from the remains of the Christian Democrats, Berlusconi occupied the *palazzo di governo* [governor's palace] for several months. It was not a pleasant experience, but at least a short one: in his seven months in power, Berlusconi's problems with the justice system virtually paralyzed the country, and he proved unable to translate into political action anything but his self-interests. His shaky government coalition collapsed because of infightings among his ruling partners after he was indicted for bribery in November 1994.

Though in 1996 the center-left won the special elections (by a narrow margin), Berlusconi became the leading figure of the opposition, biding his time until the next elections while being able to use the political process to gain parliamentary immunity for those business associates who were most vulnerable to arrest for corruption (thus in the best position to implicate him). By 1998 he had been able to refinance his company, renaming it Mediaset, and get new bank loans and sell its shares to outside investors. More importantly, he managed to keep control of 45 percent of the TV audiences and 90 percent of the television advertising market. He used this advantage in the 2001 elections, which he easily won. And with the experience of 1994 under

his belt, he set up a much stronger government, this time able to go the distance.

Berlusconi was elected twice, thanks in part to his control of the media landscape, from television stations to newspapers, from polling institutes to advertising agencies. After his second victory in a decade, his rise to the premiership in 2001 paved the way to absolute control over the national media system. For the first time in a Western democracy, the instruments of political, financial and media power were concentrated in the hands of one person. How did this happen? In this chapter we will address this question through a reconstruction of the history of the relationships between political power and the communication system in Italy since World War II.

Media and Power in the Post-War Period: State Monopoly and Clerical Dominance

On telecommunication matters, the Italian legislature has always asserted the state's right to tightly control the media. During Mussolini's fascist regime, the government had given *Ente Italiano Audizioni Radiofoniche* [EIAR, Italian Radio Transmission Corporation] a monopoly over all radio broadcasting in the peninsula. EIAR was a public corporation controlled by the state and accountable to it. In addition, the Fascist Party controlled an agency for broadcasting to rural areas, the *Ente Radio Rurale* [Rural Radio Corporation]. The regime used the evocative qualities of radio sounds for propaganda purposes, mixed with a great deal of classical music, opera and radio dramas. As everywhere in the 1930s, radio was the first medium in Italy to introduce listeners to the sounds and rhythms of industrial society, with its signaling of the hour, music for calisthenics and morning weather report. Surprisingly, it appears that few Italians during that era listened to foreign stations that were easily received at night. Only during the Second World War did Italians begin to listen to Allied transmissions, especially Radio London, to receive information that was censored by the government.

After the war, telecommunications were taken firmly into the hands of the government, which since 1948 had been composed of various coalitions of center-right parties centered on the Christian Democrats. With the introduction of television in 1954, a new state company, *Radiotelevisione Italiana* [RAI, or Italian Broadcasting Corporation], was formed to impose a severe code of conduct on the nascent television industry. From its very beginning, RAI was controlled by the Christian Democrats and heavily influenced by the Catholic Church. RAI regularly offered religious education programs, and news and current affairs programs with a heavily anti-Communist bias. Light music, variety shows, quiz shows and sports events made up the great majority of RAI's broadcasts. As P. Ginsborg noted, attempts to control television's content were particularly evident in the field of advertising: "Forced to choose between America's laissez-faire inundations and the BBC's total ban, RAI came out with a uniquely Italian form of advertising: advertisements were grouped together in a half-hour program called *Carosello* which was transmitted at peak viewing time, just after the eight o'clock news" (Ginsborg 1990: 240).

Carosello formed a first generation of TV viewers by segmenting television time:

shows for the general audience were on until nine o'clock, and afterwards there were shows with adult content. Children were greatly attracted to the narrative character of *Carosello* spots, each lasting 110 seconds. Product names could be mentioned only at the beginning and for five seconds at the end of each spot, leaving the rest of the time to be filled with stories, cartoons and songs. In this seemingly innocuous way, children were introduced to the delights of consumerism. By 1960, three years after its introduction, *Carosello* was the most watched television program in Italy (Calabrese 1975).

By then television had become a mass phenomenon. The 88,000 subscribers of 1954 had grown to one million in 1958. By 1965, 49 percent of Italian families owned a television set (Ginsborg 1990). During all this time, apart from some isolated instances of independent journalism, RAI had functioned as the megaphone of the Christian Democrats, expressing a clerical and conformist culture whose idea of entertainment was proselytizing and whose idea of news was propaganda. Given that RAI was financed by *Istituto per la Ricostruzione Industriale* [IRI, Institute for Industrial Reconstruction]—one of Europe's largest public corporations—its top managers were appointed by the government, namely, the Christian Democrats. With their strategy of occupying all levels of public corporations, the Christian Democrats used RAI as yet another tool for reinforcing their power. Starting in the mid-1950s, key RAI positions, one by one, were filled with party loyalists. Under Ettore Bernabei, protégé of the Christian Democrat leader Amintore Fanfani, RAI was run in a feudal fashion. Not only were RAI's personnel decisions dictated from top to bottom by party affiliation rather than professional qualification, but the entire programming operation was also determined by the Christian Democrats and their allies, thus creating a suffocating and stagnant environment. TV shows, for instance, were not to "bring discredit on or undermine the institution of the family; nor were they to portray attitudes, poses or particulars which might arouse base instincts" (Ginsborg 1990: 240).

The Liberalization of Airwaves and the Birth of the Free Radio Movement: Autonomy and Communication

In the late 1960s, when social movements erupted all over Italy, the world of communication was not immune to the call for change. The need for greater pluralism in newscasts and television programming in general slowly gathered momentum. It was immediately apparent that this need could not be met within the state system of RAI monopoly. This realization produced the first attempts to break the state monopoly through a liberalization of radio and television broadcasting, and by opening the airwaves to private ventures.

It was not until 1974, however, that the broadcasting world saw a significant political change. In that year, the *Corte Costituzionale*, Italy's Supreme Court, declared the state monopoly on airwaves unconstitutional, creating the conditions for independent local broadcasting. In the spring of 1976, the first "free radios" started local operations in various Italian cities. Among them was Radio Alice, a Bolognese radio

station that became the loudspeaker of the spontaneous, anti-authoritarian and creative youth movement that exploded in 1977 (see chapter 3). In Milan, Canale 96 started broadcasting, and in Rome, Radio Città Futura. All over Italy, radio ventures were formed, financed and produced by small political collectives, feminist groups, independent journalists, artists, poets, musicians—by people, in short, who could not get access to the public broadcasting service because they were not supported by any powerful politicians. It was a strong explosion, and its effects were clearly felt in the following years. By the end of 1976, 300 radio stations more or less associated with the youth movement formed their own association, the *Federazione Radio Emittenti Democratiche* [FRED, Democratic Radio Broadcasters Federation], based on a clear anti-authoritarian platform. The year 1977 was crucial for Italian society and culture. It marked the emergence of a political identity independent from traditional parties—above all the *Partito Comunista Italiano* [PCI, Italian Communist Party]—among students and young workers. A process of radical cultural secularization also began, as well as a critique of all ideologies that had dominated the national cultural landscape with their moralism and hypocrisy.

Moreover, 1977 saw the birth of a new sociocultural figure destined to have a leading role in the next decade: the semiotic operator, a professional specializing in information, artistic expression, or mass communication techniques. These were mostly young people who had been exposed to the theories and techniques of mass culture and had come to see themselves as producers of communication for a mass market. In this light, we understand how 1977 signals the passage from industrial society (and from the mechanical labor that produced goods through physical effort) to a postindustrial society (in which directly productive intellectual work plays a central role). In this process, intellectual labor—or more precisely, cognitive labor—began to undergo the effects of the alienation of capitalist production.

The youth movement of 1977 developed an innovative awareness of these problems, particularly that economic laws and political power tended to put down intellectual, artistic and techno-scientific activity. This is the reason why their revolt had an originality not found in any other movement of the twentieth century, and why it was geared not only against Western capital but also against the authoritarianism of the communist parties, especially the PCI (who returned the antagonism in kind). The movement of 1977 understood the importance of communication with a clarity unprecedented in earlier political protest movements. The problem of communication was central because it was a movement largely composed of artists, intellectuals and poets who were rebelling against the subalternity to which the capitalist system subjected them. The movement anticipated the tendency that would bring the media system to function as a key control mechanism in terms of politics as well as the reproduction of social and economic power. The Italian Left, led by the PCI, did not approve of the libertarian spirit of this movement and its autonomous aspirations, and turned against it with critical reasoning that bears consideration in the light of Berlusconi's videocratic success. Essentially, the representatives of the Communist Party said: "You kids are taking advantage of the freed-up airwaves to start your own little radio stations, full of energy and democratic goodwill. But beware, tomor-

row the big financial groups will move in and occupy the entire field of broadcasting. Liberalization is a double-edged sword and media will end up in the hands of the group with the most money to invest."

Today this warning may appear prophetic, but in hindsight the PCI's strident defense of public broadcasting appears to have been a calculated choice, and at least as ill advised as the movement's naïve approach to liberalization. It was a conservative choice, for a politics of the defense of the public system against liberalization was destined to fail. The state monopoly was bound to be defeated, and it was a question of accepting the battle on the terrain of *communication* from below. The people initially associated with the free radio stations fought to carve out a niche in broadcasting, and in the process explored new forms of communication that provided precious opportunities for change.

The Left, especially the PCI, reacted to the social movements of the 1970s with hostility, seeing them as a danger to the unity of the working class and an anarchistic provocation against the state. In those years, PCI policy was defined by the historic compromise of a cultural, and then political, alliance between the forces of the Left and the Catholic forces represented by the Christian Democracy. This alliance reinforced the most conservative components of both parties, such as their fundamentalism and intolerance of unorthodox social behaviors, which were stigmatized as antinational and elitist. The result of this policy was the creation of a system of unified power, closed to every form of social opposition and autonomous cultural expression. This led to a partition of political power that came to be called "consociativism," meaning the sharing of institutional power as well as the economic privileges associated with the spoils system of state patronage. Naturally, the public broadcasting service was affected by consociativism, and it became a sort of cultural manifestation of the conformism of the party-centric regime. Instead of engaging itself in the liberalization of broadcasting, or supporting local initiatives in the communication domain, the Left asked for a slice of RAI's monopoly. Their wish was granted. Parliament passed a law reforming the television service under which RAI was divided into three networks according to the political parties: RAI One, the most-established and best-financed network, remained under the control of the Christian Democrats, and two new networks were created to accommodate the socialists and the PCI, who received RAI Two and RAI Three respectively. In this way, the state monopoly tried to resist the liberalization process initiated by the *Corte Costituzionale* in its 1975 ruling and put into effect by the free radio stations, but it was eventually abused by private television networks. The Left completely underestimated the importance of the liberalization of the broadcasting system. Pursuing a logic of state patronage and clientelism, of consociativism and political harmony, the Left distanced itself from the capillary process of spontaneous and autonomous communicative production initiated by the free radio stations.

The year 1977 was pivotal in the history of politics and communication in Italy. It marked a moment of passage from the modernist scenario of the twentieth century—with its conflicts between clearly recognizable classes, its ambitious ideological prospects, and its industrial production system—to the postmodern scenario

in which ideological conflicts attenuate, human activity increasingly shifts toward immaterial production, labor becomes intellectualized, and politics becomes a televised spectacle.

In Italy, much more than anywhere else, 1977 was marked by the explosion of movements that rejuvenated the cultural and political patrimony of previous social movements—above all, the 1968 era of collective action—and foreshadowed the postindustrial transition. Unfortunately, these movements did not succeed in constructing an autonomous communication system, partly because the parties of the Left remained mired in their antiquated political logic, and reduced these movements to marginal elements from which they drew energy to consolidate their own power. The Left was unprepared to confront the neoliberal ideologues that took control of Western economic policies in the 1980s.

During these years, newly formed corporations absorbed the energies of that movement by co-opting its most capable members with entrepreneurial opportunities and promises of great financial rewards. This was particularly clear in the arena of media production. Journalists who developed their skills in the free radio movement were made into media professionals by commercial networks; artists who had expressed their rebellious creativity on city walls were hired by Milan's advertisement agencies; poets became copywriters; and so on. In short, the social intelligence and technical competence of the social movements of 1977 were bought by private entrepreneurs who were organizing the assault on the collective imaginary.

The movement of autonomous communication had the communicative competence but lacked the financial means to create an independent production circuit. In Italy, only the political parties, through the welfare services of the local governments, could have played such a role, but their hostility toward the spontaneous movements made such a collaboration impossible. The result was that the people from these movements were seduced by the financial means of big business and, from these creative experiments, Berlusconi was able to draw the blood that nourished his media monster.

From Liberalization to Duopoly: Berlusconi and his Twin Brother

The formation of Berlusconi's media empire started in 1974 with Telemilano Cavo, a local cable-TV station broadcasting neighborhood council meetings, information on available services, and the occasional movie for the tenants of Milano 2, a 700,000 square-meter residential complex built entirely by Berlusconi in Milan's suburbs (Berlusconi had convinced some local politicians to reroute the flight patterns of a Milan airport, turning a noisy and unattractive piece of real estate into a financial goldmine). Four years later, Telemilano started broadcasting to the entire city of Milan from a studio built in the storeroom of the Jolly Hotel in Milano 2. Berlusconi's channel, which took the name *Canale 5* [Channel 5], was able to lure media personalities away from RAI, including Mike Bongiorno, the most popular quiz-show host on Italian television. It succeeded in acquiring movies never before shown on television (such as the library of Titanus International), and it also broad-

cast American television series (such as *Dallas*). It was around this latter type of transmission that the audience of Canale 5 was built, as well as the culture and imaginary that emerged in the 1980s, with their particular mix of cynicism, aggressive hedonism and opportunism.

In the years following 1977, everyday life changed dramatically. The social engagement and playful practices of the youth movement were replaced by political terrorism, drug abuse, the retreat into private life and the abandonment of collective action. The gathering places of the collectives, the youth centers, were squashed by police repression, attacked by aggressive magistrates, and undermined by the infiltration of heavy drugs and the seduction of armed struggle. The autonomy movement gradually disappeared, and in its place emerged armed and violent groups such as the *Brigate Rosse* [Red Brigades] and *Prima Linea* [First Line].

The cities themselves changed shape: people abandoned the streets and piazzas and stayed home in the evening. The urban landscape evoked fear and sadness. Social anxiety spread with heroin abuse. Berlusconi's television fed into this melancholization of the urban environment: "*Torna a casa in tutta fretta c'è Canale 5 che ti aspetta*" [Hurry, hurry home, channel 5 is waiting for you] was one slogan of the new television network launched by the enterprising Milanese lawyer. Depressing, yes, but also accurate and appealing.

In 1979, Berlusconi founded Fininvest to control his growing interest in the media business. A year later, Canale 5 became a national network. It circumvented the law reserving the national airwaves for RAI by buying numerous small, regional stations, and by having each one broadcast the same program just seconds apart, thus achieving a national audience (and high ad rates) while appearing to obey the letter of the law. In 1981, Berlusconi founded Publitalia, an advertising holding company that in few years gained control of 80 percent of the national business. In 1982, he bought another network, Italia 1, owned by the publisher Edilio Rusconi. In that same year he bought the television company Telealtomilanese (owned by the Rizzoli family) and its extensive film library, which included the best of Italian neorealism, for next to nothing. The Rizzoli man who offered Berlusconi such a sweet inside deal, Enzo Scognamiglio, found himself on the ballot for Forza Italia in 1994 and was elected to the Senate—of which he became the president. In 1984, Berlusconi acquired his final national network based on local distribution, *Retequattro* [Channel 4], from Mondadori. Berlusconi managed all the deals and the operations of the networks, down to the minutest detail. The Italian journalist Enzo Biagi bitterly commented: "If Berlusconi had tits, he would also play the co-hostess on his network's game shows."

The ideological and communicative style that we associate with Berlusconi was shaped during these years. While Italian society was overwhelmed by anxiety, fear and depression, and while the Left insisted on imposing sacrifices upon the working class in order to curb inflation and lift the country out of the recession, a new sociopolitical configuration emerged based on superficial optimism and competitive individualism. This configuration found its political expression in the new secretary of the Socialist Party, Bettino Craxi, and its sociocultural definition in Berlusconi's

media. The prospect of liberalization and democratization expressed by the movement of 1977 was twisted into a process of cultural transformation in which intellectual labor was engulfed by the economic cycle of corruption. After Tangentopoli, Craxi was vilified for many years, up until his death in exile in 2000; however, we cannot forget that it was Craxism that accomplished the secularization of Italian society and its partial emancipation from the two dominant churches of those years: the Catholic church of the Pope, De Gasperi and Andreotti, and the Communist church of Togliatti, Longo and Berlinguer.

Above all, Craxism followed the transformation of Italian society, centering it on immaterial production, entertainment and show business. Craxi, and later Berlusconi, were the leaders of a new social class, a type of *lumpenbourgeoisie* that profited from the economic transition from an organic industrial system to a polymorphous infoproduction system.

This class became wealthy through the growth of imaginary commodities: advertising, financial services (especially speculative financing), and the global cycle of information and entertainment. The power of the lumpenbourgeoisie was founded upon the libertarian attacks on state monopolies of the 1970s. But while the Left was busily defending the public monopoly on information instead of supporting the democratic proliferation of broadcasting centers, Craxi and Berlusconi took advantage of the breakup of the monopoly and little by little managed to control the entire domain of national media.

During the 1980s, as Craxi's political and Berlusconi's cultural leadership solidified, Italian society became increasingly secularized, freeing itself from the dogmas of both the Christian Democrats and the Communists. However, the lumpenbourgeoisie was in turn producing its own dogma, no less powerful than former ones, of financial success through greed and aggressiveness. And this ideology was the center of the winning class values of the yuppie years.

Both Craxi and Berlusconi were marked by the same aggressive optimism—the belief in efficiency, the mirage of financial success, ruthless competition and hyperactivism. Their optimism dominated the Italian sociopolitical landscape of the 1980s, but this optimism had a macabre side, consisting of a mishmash of vulgar jokes, squalid stripteases, sexual blackmail, hypocrisy and existential poverty. It was the optimism of bad taste, of success at the expense of the weak, and organized societal plundering.

Craxi's political actions were indissoluble from Berlusconi's television and advertising policy. For fifteen years they shared their activities in perfect harmony. For fifteen years they marched to the same tune of national recovery written by the secret Masonic Lodge P2 (to which they both belonged). For fifteen years they locked people in their homes to watch billions of hours of television, while boasting that this was the best of all possible worlds.

During this period, Berlusconi produced the psychochemical social conditions for Craxi's political success while Craxi created the political conditions for the ultimate conquest of the Italian infosphere by his good friend Berlusconi. During his entire political tenure, Craxi—leader of the PSI for fifteen straight years and Italy's prime

minister for four—supported the formation of Berlusconi's empire by contempt of Italian laws, public opinion and good taste.

The first legal case was brought against Berlusconi in 1984. As we have seen, the national broadcasting of Canale 5 was in violation of the law. For years this violation was tolerated by the silent complicity of Parliament. On October 16, 1984, acting on the protest of a small cartel of independent television stations, three local magistrates ordered the blackout of Canale 5 within the territory under their jurisdiction. Craxi, then prime minister, responded swiftly. He invited Berlusconi to Parliament, and immediately declared the magistrate's action void through a legal decree tailored to his friend's needs. Canale 5 continued its broadcasts. This would not be the last time Craxi intervened on Berlusconi's behalf. Berlusconi thanked his friend in several ways. He made Craxi the best man at his wedding to his second wife, and prosecutors in Milan later located at least \$6 million that was moved from foreign bank accounts belonging to Fininvest to bank accounts in Tunisia they believed were controlled by Craxi.

In those years, Berlusconi also began to buy print media. First he bought *Sorrisi e Canzoni*, a weekly magazine that he transformed into a TV guide for his networks. Then he bought *Il Giornale Nuovo*, a daily Milanese newspaper directed by Indro Montanelli, and lastly he launched an assault against the editorial giant Mondadori, owner of the most read Italian daily newspaper, *Il Giornale Nuovo*, and two political weeklies, *L'Espresso* and *Panorama*. His takeover was contested by another mogul, Carlo De Benedetti, chief executive officer of Olivetti, an Italian computer company, who had joined forces with Fiat, the biggest Italian carmaker, in his attempt to wrestle control of Mondadori. After a hard-fought battle the matter went to arbitration, and the judge responsible for the decision, Vittorio Metta (at the time, judge of the Civil Appellate Court in Rome), ruled that Berlusconi should be awarded all of Mondadori's holdings, with the exception of *Il Giornale Nuovo* and *L'Espresso*.

In the following years, judicial investigations revealed that the judgment regarding the ownership of Mondadori had been heavily influenced by Berlusconi's lawyers, especially by Cesare Previti. The lawyers had bribed the presiding magistrates in order to obtain a favorable judgment. After this highly suspect and contested victory, several sectors of public opinion began to sound an alarm regarding the increasing power of Fininvest within the national mediascape. It was time to regulate the jungle. Thanks to Craxi, the regulation became a pure and simple legitimization of the accumulated power of Berlusconi.

In 1990, a new law on media ownership (called the *Legge Mammì* [Mammì Law], after the name of its main proponent) was drafted by the Craxi-controlled government. The Mammì Law stated that any private corporation could own up to three national networks. At this point, Berlusconi owned three paid cable channels. The new law allowed any private corporation to own up to three paid cable channels and it contained two measures that created the appearance of sacrifice on Berlusconi's part. One forced him to give up most of his share of a pay-TV satellite network, while the other established that the owner of a national TV network could

not also possess a national daily newspaper. Berlusconi got around the second by "selling" his daily newspaper, the conservative *Il Giornale*, to his brother, Paolo. (He sold off most of his stock in the satellite-TV venture to a group of investors, some of whom he actually lent money, thereby enabling them to make the purchase.)

But the real scandal of the Mammì Law was that Berlusconi's company Fininvest had paid off the principal drafters of the legislation. In 1993, a government official acknowledged receiving a 10 billion lire bribe (approximately \$8 million at the time) for Minister Mammì and his party. Mammì's legislative aide, David Giacalone, received a personal payment of more than \$300,000—which Fininvest insists was a "consulting fee," but which magistrates considered a bribe.

The Berlusconi-Craxi tandem control of Italian society continued to prosper until a group of Milanese prosecutors (known thereafter as the *Mani Pulite* [Clean Hands Team]) began to prosecute the widespread corruption in the economic and government arenas. Led by the prosecutor Antonio de Pietro, within a few years Tangentopoli unveiled corruption at the highest levels of government, from the Socialist ex-prime minister Craxi to the Christian Democrat ex-prime minister and senator-for-life Andreotti, as well as a within number of business institutions (including, for example the Enimont corporation). By 1993, hundreds of politicians were under investigation—virtually the entire regime of the 1980s was going to jail. By 1994, Berlusconi was wiped out of political allies: Craxi had fled the country after having been indicted on too many counts of corruption, the Socialist Party was in disarray, and Andreotti had been disgraced. When he decided to run for political office, Berlusconi portrayed himself as a businessman without political connections, an enemy of political clientelism. Nothing could have been further from the truth. Berlusconi, since the very beginning of his career, had been helped and protected by the Mafia-like political cartel, and by the highest state offices throughout the 1980s. The last years of the CAF alliance (named after Craxi, Andreotti and Forlani—who, like Andreotti, was another leader of the Christian Democrats, and was also found guilty of having accepted tens of millions of dollars in kickbacks) were years of strict symbiosis with Fininvest's media power. The Fininvest empire manufactured ideologies and dominance strategies for the CAF alliance, providing it with the support of its millions of viewers. In return, CAF paved the road for private media penetration and occupation of the social imaginary. Orwell's dystopic imagination seems to have found in Italy its first realization precisely in 1984, the year that Craxi legalized the practices of the emerging company. Media saturation of reality and the progressive political barbarization of everyday life had finally found each other.

By 1994, when Berlusconi decided to enter politics, prosecutors had begun to discover the trail of Fininvest bribes, and Berlusconi's political protectors were either in jail, under indictment or had fled the country. "If I don't enter politics, they'll tear me to pieces," he told Indro Montanelli, the editor-in-chief of *Il Giornale*. Montanelli was to become one of the first victims of the conflicts of interest created by the new hybrid creature, Berlusconi-politician. Sharing a basic conservative orientation with Montanelli, Berlusconi had left him free to run the newspaper, which Montanelli himself founded. But when *Il Giornale* refused to endorse Berlusconi as

a candidate, Montanelli found himself under siege. First there were angry calls from Berlusconi himself—even though he had officially sold the paper to his brother. Then the anchorman of one of Berlusconi's TV networks actually called for Montanelli's resignation on the air. Finally, Berlusconi entered the newsroom and insisted on addressing the staff himself, berating them for their fainthearted support. Montanelli resigned in protest after the incident and a more pliant editor was hired.

In his campaign for the election, Berlusconi showed how powerful the synergy of media and politics could be. His campaign manager, Marcello Dell'Utri, was the head of the advertising wing of Fininvest, a company called Publitalia. Dell'Utri used the sales staff of the company as his electoral machine and recruited a vast number of candidates from among Berlusconi employees, consultants and business partners. Forza Italia became known as the *partito-azienda* [company party].

Berlusconi introduced a new level of media sophistication into Italian political life. He blanketed the airwaves with catchy, slickly produced commercials and was constantly present on every network. Moreover, the Fininvest news broadcasts were virtually indistinguishable from advertisements. When handling the delicate issue of political bribery, Berlusconi's news broadcasters would actually read company press releases as if they were independently prepared newscasts (a practice later rediscovered by the Bush II propaganda machine).

From the Private-Public Duopoly to Berlusconi's Monopoly

1994, the year of the transition from the First to the Second Republic, was marked by the general election on March 27, 1994. For the first time in Italian history, an election was based on a majoritarian, winner-take-all system, as opposed to the proportional system used since 1945.

Berlusconi's Forza Italia, and its allies from the Right, easily won the election. Berlusconi's most faithful ally was the neo-fascist Alleanza Nazionale, which won 14 percent of the vote and its first chance in almost 50 years to be part of a government. The second ally was the Lega Nord, which ran a federalist platform based on Northern Italy's pride in its self-disciplined and hard-working people, while attacking Rome and the South for their corruption and patronage. The Lega Nord was in the frontline of the struggle against the corruption of the old regime, which they accused of being anti-Northern and "too Roman." Although the Lega Nord only got 8 percent of the vote, due to the geographic concentration of their support, they were able to translate this small portion into a great number of seats in Parliament. Since the Lega Nord strongly supported the judiciary's indictments against the leaders of the previous regime, its alliance with Berlusconi and the many "recycled" politicians who had found a place in Forza Italia produced some uneasiness and augured a difficult cohabitation. Finally, there was a third ally: the *Centro Cristiano Democratico* [CCD, Christian Democratic Center], the remains of the right wing of the old Christian Democrats. They were Catholic fundamentalists, fervent pro-lifers and entrenched politicians commanding the Southern vote, including that of organized crime. Their six percent of the vote guaranteed them a minor role in new cabinet.

In April 1994, this motley crew assumed the power democratically granted by the Italian voters. From the very beginning it was crystal clear that one of their prime targets for control was the communications field. The "new" regime wanted to seize control of RAI, where the Left still had some influence. One of the first acts of Berlusconi's government was indeed an attack on RAI, which it claimed was poorly managed and too costly. Notwithstanding the obvious conflict of interest, Berlusconi proposed that government support of RAI be eliminated. Of course the government did not mention that there was a conflict of interest, though in less-guarded moments, Berlusconi remarked that he saw no reason for his government to financially support his political opposition. With the pure and simple elimination of RAI, Berlusconi would have been able to enjoy complete control over the Italian airwaves, but this suggestion caused a firestorm, and the President of the Republic, Oscar Luigi Scalfaro, intervened. In the end, following a well-established Italian strategy, a compromise was reached. RAI was allowed to survive, but in exchange Berlusconi was allowed to remove RAI's board of directors and replace the news directors of all three state networks with pro-Berlusconi people, in some cases his former employees. The Lega Nord gave him a hard time in the nomination process of the new board of directors, but eventually acquiesced.

Thus, Berlusconi had 90 percent of Italy's TV airwaves at his disposal. He became the sole agent of telecommunication. But then things began to go wrong.

In June 1994, the World Cup soccer final between Italy and Brazil went into overtime, and penalty kicks were needed to decide the winner. AC Milan's forward Daniele Massaro, a Forza Italia sympathizer who only a week before had declared that losing to Nigeria would have been a national shame, missed the decisive kick, and sent the entire Italian population into a general depression. Berlusconi had been hoping for a victory, and had planned to release, in the week of the celebrations, a government decree of amnesty for many politicians arrested during the corruption investigation. The obvious hope was that the cries of triumph would have covered the cries in opposition to this amnesty. But in the absence of that victory, when Berlusconi decree's came into effect—with the result that many of the politicians arrested in Operation Clean Hands were released from jail overnight—the response of the Italian population registered loud and clear: corrupt politicians had to be tried, and the "Save the Thieves Decree" (as it came to be known) was withdrawn. After that, Berlusconi's lucky star faded quickly. When the government attempted to attack the pension system, social opposition became so strong that in the end, the Lega Nord withdrew its support of the government and provoked the fall of Berlusconi's government. His first political era was over.

Five Years of the Center-Left

In 1995, after the fall of the first Berlusconi government, a year-long confused period followed during which Lamberto Dini, a man who had initially supported Berlusconi and then distanced himself from him, led a transition government propped up by the center-left parties.

Lamberto Dini was a trusted man of international finance, and made the passage from the rambling populism of the center-right coalition to a modernist version of liberalism possible, from which center-left government, in its various incarnations, was interpreted over the following years. General elections were held again in April 1996. In the meantime, the forces of the center-left—in particular the *Democristiani di Sinistra* [DS, Democrats of the Left], the main party of the Left founded in 1991 after reshaping the PCI into a moderate-left political party and the *Democrazia è Libertà – La Margherita* [DL, Democracy is Freedom] or “Daisy,” a smaller party which combined liberal parties with centrist former-Christian Democrats—had agreed on the nomination of a centrist, Romano Prodi, and formed a “progressive” coalition for the upcoming elections.

A Professor of Economics at the University of Bologna, Prodi had been a representative of the Christian Democracy, and in the past had directed the IRI, an institute that brought together state-run companies. His position had always been far from the unchained liberalism of the center-right, and a very broad democratic array assembled around his figure—ranging from the Christian Left to the wide area of the former communists. The “progressives” won the election and formed a government backed by a coalition that took the name *Ulivo* [Olive Tree], and was supported from the outside by *Partito di Rifondazione Comunista* [PRC, Communist Refoundation], a party founded in 1991 that brought together nostalgics from the old Communist Party with a somewhat heterogeneous formation of Trotskyites and grassroots trade union organizations.

Prodi's political program represented the refusal of the ideological fanaticism of the Right, but his political appeal depended on two features: the construction of an original media scenario and his European credentials. Berlusconi had built his image on the aggressiveness of the victorious social classes, on their exasperation with the cadences of political polemic, on the legitimatization of old nationalist myths now proposed through the soccer imaginary, and on an unscrupulous and spectacular modernism. Prodi was the perfect character to spoil this game.

Prodi is from Emilia, a region of north-central Italy which during the century-long process of modernization had managed to balance urban industrial development with community values, keep the focus of its cities on the local inhabitants, and sustain an efficient public administration (especially in local services, from housing to education to health care). Furthermore, Prodi knew how to transfer his Emilian good nature to a media image: his regional Italian recalled that of Emilian peasants, his quiet and preachy delivery had the cadenza of a rural priest, his plump face inspired avuncular trust and earned him the nickname “*mortadella*” (a type of Emilian cold-cut ham, like bologna). Berlusconi—the Milanese businessman who promised a million new jobs but didn't deliver any—couldn't survive the comparison with the Emilian economics professor. The televised clashes between Berlusconi and Prodi turned into a defeat of the image of the man who had built his power on image. To Berlusconi's optimistic and high-sounding declarations, Prodi responded with calm, returning a tenor of realism that reassured viewers.

On a political level, Prodi's trump card, and that of the center-left coalition he

represented, was his relationship with European institutions, especially the decision-making centers of the European Union. Berlusconi has never been well regarded by the crucial countries of the European Union. Particularly in France, public opinion and high state officials starting with then-President Mitterand, regarded Forza Italia and Berlusconi as a dangerous eruption of anti-democratic populism. The European Economic Authority, which in those years was putting the finishing touches on the common monetary system in preparation for the launch of the single currency, did not demonstrate much confidence in the choices of the Italian government. Prodi was clearly better prepared to keep the country plugged in to Europe not only in economic terms, but above all in cultural terms.

In 1996, Berlusconi entrusted his image to the immaterial level of electronic media, especially during news broadcasts, going as far as to have Emilio Fede, the most faithful of his networks' news anchormen, declare that he would leave the country if the “communists” won the elections. Prodi, on the other hand, launched a campaign of imaginary reterritorialization. He rented a bus, and for forty days he traveled the length and breadth of Italy, organizing meetings in the different regions, establishing a dialogue with an audience of professionals, workers and students everywhere he went. Prodi's European credentials combined with his down-to-earth media appeal proved the difference, and the center-left coalition won the elections by a narrow margin.

In a certain sense, Prodi's victory represented the refusal of a certain technomedia determinism, according to which domination over the television system automatically translates into winning the consensus of the majority. But that is not the case. Certainly, communication technologies put powerful devices in the hands of political power, but this means that politics must assimilate the language of the media—it must play that game. And this is what Romano Prodi succeeded in doing. The bus played counterpoint to the television on the level of the imaginary.

Prodi's government was backed by a diverse and divided center-left coalition, and had to rely on the external support of the PRC in order to govern. Thus it was based on a fragile equilibrium, which ruptured after two years of government. In 1998, the PCR demanded, as a condition for their continued support, a radical social policy—in particular the reduction of the working week to thirty-five hours. It was an attempt to remove Italy from the orbit of liberalist politics that had dominated the decade. Moderate elements of the center-left certainly had no intention of making such a break with international liberalism. The frame of reference for the Italian center-left was the Third Way of Blair and Clinton, not the pluralist Left of French prime minister Lionel Jospin, who during those years tried (with little luck) to launch a social policy based on the reduction of the working week to thirty-five hours. The center-left could not accept the PCR's ultimatum, and so, after lengthy negotiations and a confidence vote in Parliament lost by three votes, Prodi decided to resign.

The center-left was faced with a choice: call a new election, or try to form a new government. Many on the Left thought that it would be better to go to the polls straight away, and seek a new mandate for a center-left government. Ultimately,

however, the second option prevailed. Massimo D'Alema, secretary of the Left Democrats, the party which had picked up the majority of the old communist electorate, managed to obtain the backing of the same forces that had previously supported Prodi. But in the meantime, suspicions and rivalries had weakened the center-left block. Prodi's supporters felt doubly betrayed at the hands of the former communists. The Olive Tree, the progressive coalition, had lost its unity, and D'Alema did not have the same type of quiet authority as Romano Prodi. D'Alema is a man shaped by late-communist culture, and had made a career as a political functionary during the 1970s and '80s. After 1989, like many Communist Party functionaries of the Brezhnev era, D'Alema refashioned himself as a reformist. The definition of "reformist" lost its original connotations during the 1990s. The reformism of the former communists in Russia, as in Italy and elsewhere, is above all the mark of a cultural supplication to liberal ideology. While Prodi aroused mild feelings of approval throughout the center and the center-left, D'Alema stirred strong feelings of hostility both in the Catholic milieu close to Prodi and among the radical Left, who accused him of subalternity to neoliberalism.

Furthermore, D'Alema had to handle the international crisis in the Balkans, in particular the military intervention in Kosovo against the Serbian Republic. For the first time since 1945, Italy took part in direct military operations under the aegis of NATO. The humanitarian motivation for the conflict was not enough to sway the majority of opinion on the Left. Article 11 of the Constitution states that "Italy repudiates war as an instrument for the resolution of international conflicts," and for the vast majority of leftist militants, whether of a Catholic or a Marxist conviction, this violation of a constitutional taboo was an unforgivable offense. D'Alema's image became distasteful to a large section of the leftist electorate. D'Alema had not come to government as a result of a direct vote, the electorate had voted for Prodi; only through political maneuvering had the premiership passed on to him.

In such a weak condition, D'Alema's government could not act on the most pressing issue in media politics: re-establishing democratic rules in the field of the media, namely devising a law to dismantle Berlusconi's monopoly. Although they were leaders of antagonistic groups during those years, D'Alema and Berlusconi behaved as if they had some sort of under-the-table deal between them. Already in 1996, shortly after Prodi's victory, D'Alema and Berlusconi had started negotiations for institutional reforms, establishing a commission for constitutional reform. In the end nothing came of it and the commission was dissolved, but Berlusconi came out a winner: the ongoing institutional negotiations had given him credibility as a political figure, and during the entire period of the negotiations, the attention given to this initiative impeded a clear policy of condemnation and containment of Berlusconi's media and economic strategies. This inaction continued even after the failure of the institutional reforms. Many people had asked D'Alema's government to draw up a law to establish a maximum limit on media concentration, but it didn't do a thing. As if paralyzed, the center-left waited for Berlusconi's media machine to regain the upper hand. This occurred in the spring of 2000, when local elections were held. They were a disaster for the center-left, and thus foretold an inevitable victory for

the center-right in the next general election, set for the spring of 2001.

The final year of the D'Alema government was agony, not only on the level of policy initiatives, but especially on the level of image. Although judges were collecting evidence of the crimes committed by Berlusconi and his accomplices during this period, and despite the fact that the public expected a legal solution to the conflict of interests, the center-left government did nothing about it.

The boss of the Italian mediascape, left undisturbed during those years of center-left government, threw an enormous amount of resources into the most invasive electoral campaign imaginable. Huge billboards presented Silvio Berlusconi as the workers' president, and as the entrepreneurs' president. In the atria of train stations all over Italy, giant images of Berlusconi and propaganda pavilions were erected. Mediaset spread the views of its political boss daily with news of violence provoked by Moroccan and Albanian barbarians who were arriving in Italy due to the Left's permissiveness. And at RAI, Berlusconi could count on the support of some key anchormen who, preparing themselves for the new change of regime, literally gave him *carte blanche*. In 2001, Bruno Vespa, host of a program titled *Porta a Porta* [Door to Door], a man who has always distinguished himself by his obsequiousness to political power of any stripe, invited Berlusconi onto his program. Berlusconi capitalized on the fact that *Porta a Porta* aired at prime time and enjoyed high ratings, and chose that forum to perform the signing of 'a contract with Italy.' He turned up with a piece of paper stating his political promises: work for everyone, reduced taxes and huge public works. The program was thoroughly marked by the neoliberal optimism of the 1990s. It was too late, because the times were changing, and the global economy had already entered a phase of recession. But in spring 2001, Berlusconi reinvigorated the illusion by signing his contract with the Italian people on the air.

Quite predictably, Berlusconi succeeded: Forza Italia won a strong majority of seats in Parliament and he formed a ruling coalition, again with Alleanza Nazionale and a much weaker Lega Nord. This time he had every intention to last the full term. Even if his promises had revealed themselves to be unattainable lies, he had nevertheless managed to transform the Italian sociopolitical and media landscape for good.

As expected, the center-right quickly took possession of all C3 levels (communication-command-control) and completely occupied the mediascape, in particular the television system. After winning the 2001 elections, Berlusconi got his hands on what was left of RAI, the state television system. By fall 2001, more than 90 percent of Italian television stations were under the control of people directly answerable to Berlusconi.

The Integrated Communicative System (The Gasparri Law)

The culmination of this transformation and occupation of the mediascape was reached with the Gasparri Law, approved by the Italian parliament in April 2004 (after six tries and the refusal of the President of the Republic to sign an earlier version into law). This reform had as its objective the communicative system and the

solution of conflicts of interest that Berlusconi brought with him. It was designed to respond to the widespread sentiment of unease that derived from the domination of the Mediaset group in the panorama of Italian communications. The previous law stated that one of the three television networks owned by Mediaset (Retequattro) could not continue to be broadcast over the airwaves, and had to be transferred to satellite, because one company was not allowed to possess more than two national networks broadcasting analogically. The Gasparri Law provided for the increase of the total amount of television ownership allowed to a private company by enormously widening the terms included in what the law defined as an "integrated communicative system." Mediaset was thus able to continue to broadcast its three national networks. Furthermore, the owners of television networks were also allowed to acquire daily newspapers—something the previous law prohibited (even if Berlusconi always skirted this prohibition by having it appear that his brother or his wife owned the newspapers that the law prevented him from being the titular head of), and were free to invest in "terrestrial" digital broadcasting, a new technology which did not require a satellite dish or cable for the reception of digital programs but just a regular antenna and a decoder box.

The essential picklock to consolidate his empire over the communications system consisted however in the distribution of advertising. RAI and print media were obviously at a disadvantage on this point, and the commercial television networks were awarded the possibility to surpass any existing limit of advertising programming. Infomercials were legalized without limitations, benefiting only the Mediaset empire. The law crystallized the existing divide in the advertising market, in which Mediaset had a 38.3 percent share in 2002. With a similar preeminence, the market leader was able to lower his prices to the detriment of all the others, greatly reducing the slice of the pie available to the rest of print media.

But the legislative masterpiece was the regulation established by the Gasparri Law concerning this problem of the conflict of interest. According to the law, a conflict of interest occurred when "the holder of government responsibilities" participated, proposed or performed actions that had "a specific and preferential impact on the patrimony of the holder, his/her spouse, or relatives up to the second degree, with damage to the public good." Thus it was not ownership that constituted the precedent for a conflict of interest, but management. The "mere owner" was not involved in the interest of his company, and only he who (formally) managed it should be forbidden from making political decisions that could directly concern that company. In this manner Berlusconi was safe. He was only the owner of innumerable communication companies: advertising, television, editorial as well as insurance companies, and so on. And what importance does the owner ever have?

The formulation of the regulation regarding conflict of interest allowed Berlusconi to maintain ownership of his television companies and to preside over a government that regulates and supervises the television system. When matters that directly regarded his interests needed to be discussed, it was enough that Berlusconi graciously absented himself from the floor of the Parliament. He was absent, even though he still remained the head of the government.

Wasn't this an extraordinary exhibition of arrogance, derision and insolence? Of course it was, but it didn't help much to decry these outrages as if they were anomalies to be remedied. "I hold the scepter that allows me to do anything, and thus I will do anything," Jarry's Ubu Rex continually declared. So did Berlusconi: excess was his method and his strength.

Mediascape, the Social Imaginary and Democracy

After Berlusconi's victories in 1994 and 2001, the center-left complained that Berlusconi had used his media interests to win the election. Some political commentators responded that, all in all, the balance between RAI and Fininvest guaranteed equal access, and that the center-left held control of the majority of print media. But such claims are nonsense. During every electoral campaign since 1994, the center-left front had insisted on the need for media fairness. The Parliament even elected a guarantor to monitor equal distribution of airtime among candidates. This claim was also nonsense.

Indeed, Berlusconi's campaign did not start in January 1994, with his acceptance speech full of advertising rhetoric. Rather, Berlusconi had initiated his campaign fifteen years before, when he began to create the psychological, emotional, moral and ideological conditions for the final offensive. Berlusconi had actually begun the first mass campaign to affirm a culture of corruption and arrogance in 1979, when he imported the serial *Dallas* and its character J.R. Forza Italia's 1994 electoral campaign, with its sappy tones and its jingles, was only the finishing touch in that transformation of social attitudes and tastes orchestrated in the preceding decade.

When Berlusconi's final offensive hit, the forces of the center-left did not really understand what was happening. In the 1980s, they had downplayed the political meaning of the creation of a media empire, limiting themselves to the defense of public television and its partitioning among the political parties. As late as 1993, Walter Veltroni, a leading member of the Left Democrats (formerly the PCI) and director of the leftist newspaper *L'Unità*, declared that Berlusconi should be considered, after all, a progressive.

What escaped the center-left was the fact that media power is not defined by its political statements. Television is not a medium for the creation of consensus or for a kind of rational persuasion. It is not a medium that serves to counterbalance logical argument. Television is a means of pervasion, rather than persuasion. It operates on the cognitive modalities for reception, interpretation and decision, rather than on the ideological content of the message. This is why the media populism of Berlusconi won in 1994 and again in 2001, after five years of center-left government.

Why didn't the center-left government make a law regulating the media system and the problem of the conflict of interest? The reason lies in its cultural inability to face the new reality of late-modern society. The old-fashioned culture of the Left has never really grasped the meaning of the emerging mediascape, nor understood the new relationship between media and political power, which has less to do with ideology and content and than it has to do with the systematic and pervasive occupation

of people's mental time, subconscious habits, attention and imagination.

In the end, Prime Minister Berlusconi has become the master of the entire Italian media world. In this sense, we can say that an authoritarian system exists in Italy. Its methods are not those of brute force, even if the violent face of the regime has manifested itself—for example, in the Genova repression of protesters during the G8 meeting in July of 2001. Above all else, its method consists of the manipulations of the expectations and the imaginary of the Italian people.

This is the irony of recent Italian history: the same man who started his media empire thanks to social reform and the breakup of the state monopoly caused by media activism has ended up the owner of a new monopolist system. The very conditions of democracy have been severed, not formally, but nonetheless in substance. The most substantive level of democracy, the constitution and functioning of the social imagination, has been corrupted. The most basic freedom, the freedom of thought, has been declared obsolete.

A superficial analysis could conclude that Italy is being thrown back into fascism, with the reemergence of the ideologies and behaviors of Mussolini's regime. But this would be a mistaken interpretation of events. We are not witnessing a comeback of past ideologies. What we are confronting is the power of broadcasting electronic nothingness out of the vacuum of the cathode ray tube.

Etymologically speaking, the word "fascism" comes from the bundle (or fasces) of rods bound about an axe with a projecting blade, carried by ancient Roman magistrates as a symbol of their authority. Mussolini took this image to symbolize the strength derived from people's willingness to be bound together in what he called *fasci di combattimento* [combat fasces].

In the integrated system of communication, the videocracy is represented by political nonentities built around a bundle of photons, sounds and other electronic components to produce a referential effect of managed reality. This is the image we have in mind when we analyze Berlusconi's regime: fasces of electronic nothingness beaming from the TV screens.