

Fascism and Berlusconism

by Paolo Flores d'Arcais

1

The Italy of Berlusconi is not Fascism. The proprietary dictatorship of Cavalier Berlusconi is not the political dictatorship of Cavalier Mussolini.

Fascism was, first and foremost, the violence of Mussolini's "action squads" (*squadristi*). Armed bands that set fire to the premises of unions, left-wing parties, and workers' associations, that attacked individual personages (even Catholic reformers), beating them black and blue and forcing them to drink castor oil, to add humiliation to violence. Piero Gobetti, the young liberal writer and publisher, who carried on a dialogue with Gramsci, theorist of the "factory councils," died after just such an attack.

Fascism was *essentially* violence, it is indistinguishable from violence, it was a *violent* taking of power, explicitly subverting the laws. Violence and subversion—nota bene—that could easily have been stopped, if a substantial part of the "moderate" political and institutional forces had considered legality to be a value superior to profit and privilege. Instead, Fascist violence found zealous support in the complicity of crucial sectors of the State, and in the acquiescence of all the others: from the King to the army, from the head of the government Luigi Facta to the former liberal premier Giovanni Giolitti, to the philosopher Benedetto Croce. Giolitti and Croce were convinced they could use Fascism against the "reds" and then "dismiss" it, once it had done its dirty work. The culpable illusion of half-breed liberals.

Once he became head of the government, Mussolini rapidly transformed executive power into power *tout court*. Thanks to political oppositions often lenient or weak, and always divided, and to acquiescent Catholics and liberals, he obtained the consecration of electoral consensus. At that point there was no stopping him: he liquidated the other parties, abrogated freedom of the press, and ordered the assassination of the leader of the opposition, Giacomo Matteotti. He created a system of spying that was declaredly Fascist. He introduced new political crimes, criminalizing any form of dissent, and since the ordinary magistrates did not prosecute them with the severity hoped for by the regime, he created a "Special Tribunal" to inflict years of prison or of "internal exile" (*confino*).¹

But the Fascist dictatorship did not limit itself to violence, to the repression of any form of even potential dissent. It was not satisfied with the destruction of political parties, trade unions, a free press, but demanded the organic integration of all Italians into the regime, making compulsory and inevi-

¹ Forced residence on nearly uninhabited islands, with no possibility of civil life. With bitterness and self-deprecation, some anti-Fascists who suffered this form of punishment called it "vacation." Berlusconi by contrast, to rehabilitate Mussolini, declared *seriously* that the *Duce* did nothing more serious to his opponents than treat them to years of vacation.

table their participation and collaboration—the identification between being Fascist and being Italian. From the cradle to the grave.

First of all by means of an extensive system of reciprocal spying: every building had its "house monitor" of proven Fascist faith, who kept the Fascist secret police informed about any suspicion or even the slightest murmuring, about any joke against the regime. But if here we are still at the level of repression, in fact it was life in its entirety that was regimented, "Fascitized." Starting with the children. From four to six years of age a boy became a "Son of the She Wolf" (and a girl a "Daughter of the She Wolf").² At nine a boy became a "Balilla"³ and a girl a "Little Italian," and at fourteen, respectively, an "Avanguardista" and a "Young Italian." Between the age of eighteen and twenty-two the boys became members of the "Youth Combat Fasces" (the girls became "Young Fascists") and of the "Fascist Youth Organization." Meanwhile, the "boy scouts" were liquidated.

Those who made it to high school and to the university became members of the "Fascist University Groups." Starting in 1934 they also took part in an annual cultural competition, the "Fascist Games," where the prize was a gold "M" (for Mussolini) monogram for their jackets. For all age-groups education was also paramilitary, of course, beginning with toy rifles for the Sons of the She Wolf, and ending with the exercises of the students under the banner of "Book and Musket—Perfect Fascist."

But in addition to the "education" (i.e., indoctrination) of the young, there was the entire adult life in which all the social services of a budding welfare state were provided only through active adherence to Fascism. Thus the National Organization for Mother and Child Welfare (*Opera nazionale maternità e infanzia*), which provided health assistance before and after childbirth and prophylaxis and care for infantile tuberculosis. Thus the National Veterans Administration (*Opera nazionale combattenti e reduci*), which organized social assistance for the veterans of the Great War (first interventionism and then "mutilated victory" had been the vehicles for the political rise of the former socialist Mussolini). Thus the Fascist National Institute for Social Welfare (*Istituto nazionale fascista per la previdenza sociale*), providing unemployment insurance, family allowances, supplementary wages for workers who have been suspended or had their hours reduced. And thus the National Recreational Club (*Opera nazionale dopolavoro*), which, in the regime's own words, "takes care of the moral and physical elevation of the people, through sports, hiking, tourism, artistic education, popular culture." Plus summer camps for children and adolescents. And for the "Fascist woman," courses in first aid, hygiene, and home economics.

So much for "free time." For the time of economic activities, every worker and every entrepreneur was organized in the "corporations" and in the unions of the regime. In essence there was no moment or aspect of the day

² Where the She Wolf is the symbol of Romancy.

³ From the nickname of a boy from Portoria (near Genoa), Gianbattista Perasso, who on 5 December 1746 sparked a popular uprising against the arrogance of the Austrian soldiers.

that escaped the ethico-political conscription of a regime whose ideal was nothing less than the *fascitization* of existence. And this totalitarian will was exercised more than ever with regard to culture. The centuries-old independence of the universities was dismantled: all professors were required to swear a loyalty oath to Fascism. All of them submitted, except for twelve (or fourteen, by other reckonings) out of 1250. The cinema deserves special mention—the regime gave it an enormous boost, in the awareness of its power to suggest. The newsreels, which preceded the projection of every film, were rigorously Fascist. And although the explicitly propagandistic films were not very successful, there were vast audiences for the blockbusters on ancient Rome (which were meant to suggest an analogy with the Fascist empire) and for the "white telephone" films, intimate stories of the good bourgeoisie that "distracted" from the problems of real life.

Fascism, in short, wanted to saturate with its presence all the spheres of existence because it wanted to create a new type of human being. Indeed, Fascism had a doctrine of its own and even an official philosopher of its own, Giovanni Gentile. A "conception of the world" of its own founded on rhetorical "virtues" and on the rhetoric of indecent prevarication (culminating in the racial laws). And it wanted to *shape* every individual according to that doctrine, alternating violence and involvement through social services or indoctrination (the *carrot* and the *stick*, as Mussolini himself wrote).

2

There is nothing, or next to nothing, of all this in the Italy of Berlusconi—not so far anyway. No "action squad" violence, first of all. And the difference between obedience and consensus obtained through physical violence rather than through mass-media manipulation is essential, especially for those who undergo it, in spite of too much Frankfurt and postmodern ideology that tends to nullify such a difference in the abstract category of "dominion."

In Italy today there is a plurality of political parties, of newspapers, of trade-union organizations. At regular intervals a parliament is elected by secret ballot. The independence of the university is acknowledged. Magistrates are designated as a result of competitive examination and are "subject only to the law"; i.e., are independent of the executive branch. In short, the Constitution officially in force is still the republican one approved in 1948 and born of the anti-Fascist Resistance. A simply formal description of its institutions betrays nothing that differentiates Italy under Berlusconi from the international standard of a liberal democracy.

But it is well known that conventional descriptions can be deceptive. On paper, Stalin's 1936 constitution of the USSR was the most democratic ever seen on the terraqueous globe. Even without making reference to this abyss of a "gap" between form and reality, all schools of political science know that the term "multipartitism" can express (or conceal) a great variety of realities, since what is fundamental are the background conditions in which voting takes place—the conditions held to be the material or socio-cultural *premises*

of democracy. In a country dominated by narcotraffic and by its gangs' control of the territory, there is no formally secret ballot that truly guarantees the citizen's free choice. Free choice that, to be properly exercised, also implies a minimum level of true information, on the facts and on the candidates. The principle "one head, one vote" establishes the *technique* for the exercise of each citizen's autonomy, but no less necessary are preliminary contexts of legality and security, equal political rights, and information, without which a free ballot tends asymptotically towards pie in the sky.

So, let us take a look at the material constitution effectively in force in the Italy dominated by Berlusconi. Let's begin with "information." Here, there are two fundamental indicators: impartiality (adherence to the facts) and plurality (number of TV channels and radio stations, press agencies, newspapers, and—never forget!—advertising agencies). In Italy the only source of information for 90% of the population is *television*. Now, with the exception of one small network ("La7," with a share of 2 to 3 percent),⁴ Berlusconi *totally* controls television information. He controls half of the six national channels (the "commercial" ones) directly (they are his private property), and the other half (the "public" ones) indirectly, since they are controlled by his government majority, which imposes personnel and programs. And in fact, out of the dozens of television newscasts and special-report and discussion broadcasts there are only two programs left where *facts* that are uncomfortable for the government are still aired (one of them, which Berlusconi "ordered" to be closed, survives, for now, only thanks to a sentence of the court). The rest is silence. TV "journalism" no longer limits itself to manipulating and sweetening the facts—it directly and simply abrogates them every time they can put Berlusconi in a bad light. His right-hand man, Senator Dell'Utri, was convicted (also after appeal) of Mafia association and sentenced to seven years in prison, but the principal TV news programs announced his *acquittal* (because he was not convicted on the charges of most recent years).

The situation is different for the print media, but only 10% of the Italians read a newspaper (sports newspapers included). Newspapers these days speak only to the elite few. And also in the print media Berlusconi owns or controls numerous publications—the most important publishing house (Mondadori), and he has already attempted to take over the most important daily paper (*Il Corriere della sera*) and is getting ready to try again, now that he has wormed trusted friends into the core of major shareholders.

3

From information to justice. If possible, the damage the Berlusconi regime has done to the principle "everybody is equal before the law" is even more damaging. A principle that in Italy is a very recent—and partial—conquest.

⁴ But rapidly increasing—in one month to over 10%—since the beginning of September, with the appointment of a journalist of the moderate right as director of its television news—a man who directed the television news of the Berlusconi network for many years, but who now prefers to be a journalist rather than a lackey.

Even after the republican Constitution came into force, justice remained substantially a matter of "class": almost absolute impunity for all sectors of the establishment, rigor and harshness for the delinquent without "friends in high places." And, above all, the principle made famous by the cynicism of Giovanni Giolitti in the first years of the past century continued to hold sway: "For friends one interprets the law, for enemies one applies it."

Things did not begin to change until the 1970s, due to a convergence of reasons I cannot go into here (I can only say that the "ripple effect" of the egalitarian movement of 1968 did have something to do with it). Some magistrates (polemically dubbed, without hesitation, "magistrates on the make" by the conservative press) began to investigate corruption scandals involving major industrial groups and members of the government. But, for the most part, the investigations at some point were transferred to Rome, where the Prosecuting Attorney's office was called the "port of mists" due to its systematic cover up of such cases. Still, in the 1980s there were more and more magistrates who were not afraid to investigate the powerful—the result being the famous "clean hands" investigation in 1992. That investigation began with a case of minor corruption (minor but hateful: it concerned the home for the aged of Milan, an institution dating from 1771 that was the pride of the city), and ended up involving the entire political system and all the most important Italian entrepreneurs.

It was the moment in which the administration of justice came closest to the constitutional dictate: the law equal for everybody, compulsory penal action, the independence of a magistracy subject only to the law.

Berlusconi is destroying all of this. Systematically. And very often with the complicity, or at least the acquiescence, of the ex-communist opposition. As concerns the penal code he has had a great number of "ad personam" laws approved, which have decriminalized the offences for which he had been convicted in the first instance or risked conviction in the future (he or his friends, obviously).⁵ Once the offense has disappeared, acquittal becomes automatic. As a result practically none of the typically "white-collar" crimes can be prosecuted any longer. Just one example, but astounding: the de facto decriminalization of "budgetary fraud" came about in the very days in which Bush—Bush, not a Bolshevik!—riding the wave of popular indignation at financial scandals in the United States, increased the penalty for that crime to over twenty years imprisonment.

Such decriminalization went hand in glove with procedural laws that made it easier and easier for individuals accused of such crimes to find loopholes (shortening of the statute of limitations, difficulties for the international rogatory letters, etc.) and a "material" policy of justice that greatly complicated the work of the magistrates, due to a lack of technical resources and of administrative personnel. In this way, with a good lawyer, the trial of an "excel-

⁵ Marco Travaglio has catalogued and illustrated dozens and dozens of such cases in his book *Ad personam*, Milan: Chiarelettere, 2010.

lent" personage almost always ends up "over the time limit," and the criminal comes out with a clean record.

Then, add to all this the institutional intimidation and mass-media aggression against the magistrates who continue to do their jobs. Even a summary chronicle would fill a whole book. In some cases there have been "warnings" in the best Mafia style. Always, in any case, highly effective mass-media persecutions, that convince the more misinformed part of the population that Berlusconi himself is a victim of the "red togas" (when in fact many of his "inquisitors" belong to the more moderate currents of the magistracy!). And add, then, the steady stream of police officers who are transferred because too assiduous in carrying out investigations unwelcome to the powers that be—a striking number of cases, even if each one, taken on its own, does not make news. And add to this the impunity the government guarantees (here, again, with the collaboration of the center-left) the agents of a full-fledged center for illegal controls, connected with covert sectors of the secret services.⁶ A center that "attentioned" (in contempt of grammar as well as of law: in plain language, *spied on*) numerous magistrates, journalists, intellectuals, and entrepreneurs whom Berlusconian power considered to be "enemies" (I myself had the honor of finding my name on these lists). It is miraculous how, in this atmosphere of delegitimization that has lasted for nearly twenty years now, there are still so many magistrates who, despite growing difficulties, continue to do their jobs without considering the powerful to be untouchable.

With regard to schools and culture things are no better. Here the destruction of critical independence has not come about through the indoctrination of a totalitarian ideology but, rather, by the creation of a climate of "pensée unique" that stirs into the molasses of conformism and commercial spectacularization that which has been reduced to mere cultural "consumption." What is more, management of the "cultural heritage," which together with the naturalistic heritage constitute the country's greatest wealth, has been taken away from the specialists (archaeologists, restorers, art historians), and the direction of our museums has been entrusted, for example, to the former manager of a McDonalds! Science has been mistreated through laughingly limited research funding, humiliating appointments (the vice president of the National Research Council [CNR] is a Catholic fundamentalist who rejects Darwinism and the standard chronologies: he believes that dinosaurs and homo sapiens lived together a few tens of thousands of years ago),⁷ and television programs fervently devoted to the "mystery" and the "ob-

⁶ Such illegal activities are directed by Pio Pompa, the right-hand man of General Pollari, head of the SISMI secret services, but the government has imposed the "state secret" statute, blocking the ongoing investigations.

⁷ I refer to Roberto de Mattei, who had a book published at the expense of the CNR (whose purpose is to promote *scientific* research!) with the title *Il darwinismo, tramonto di una ipotesi* (Darwinism, the Demise of a Hypothesis), which maintains, along with other nonsense, that the Grand Canyon was formed in a single year, as a result of the Flood; that the world is not billions and billions of years old; that the dating of fossils is fake; that the dinosaurs were still

jectivity" of miracles (Padre Pio, Madonnas who weep blood, and such things). What is more—serious—the public schools have been ruined, with the number of teachers reduced for all subjects except religion (in which teachers are paid by the State but chosen by the bishops).

The principle of the secularity of the State, already trampled on by the Fascist Concordat of 1929 and by Article 7 of the Constitution that, thanks to Togliatti, confirmed it, has been subjected to further and daily humiliation. The mass-media climate is of perennial deference to the Vatican, while legislation attempts to transform into crime that which for the Church hierarchy is sin: one of the two Houses of Parliament has already approved the law on death and dying that annuls the value of the living will and makes artificial feeding and hydration compulsory. In many hospitals women have been deprived de facto of the right to have an abortion, thanks to the increasingly widespread "conscientious objection" of doctors and nurses, fomented by the political authorities. A police search of the Italian Bishops' Conference like the one carried out in Belgium is sheer science fiction. By contrast, deal-making between the Curia and the powerful (also at the limits of the law, and beyond) is an everyday reality.

4

But it is in corruption and falsehood that the regime most lavishly celebrates its hybris. Official calculations by the General Accounting Office put the cost of corruption at 60 to 70 billion euros, but the damages are compounded by a host of side effects (necessary public works never realized, useless works left half finished, appointments of persons who are incompetent—but faithful to the corrupt—in all sectors, including health: a sea of inefficiency and waste, not to mention robbery). Parliament has a delinquency rate statistically higher than that of a truly "bad" neighborhood: twenty-odd members with definitive convictions (first instance, first appeal, second appeal), and a very high number of members under investigation or on trial.⁸ Berlusconi's government can boast one minister appointed deliberately to keep him from going on trial, who had already been convicted during the "clean hands" investigations (he was forced to resign only by the rebellion of public opinion, also from the right), an undersecretary with an arrest warrant for Camorra activities, and the discovery of a full and proper "gang" (so called in a wiretap between two persons under investigation) for the divvying up of every kind of contract. No opportunity is missed, be it the world swimming championship, the Aquila earthquake, or the 2015 Milan Expo. But in the Berlusconian entourage there has also been the corruption of magistrates, and before one sentence two judges of the Constitutional Court who went to lunch with Berlusconi!

alive 20,000 years ago; and, more generally, that Darwin's scientific hypothesis has never been proven and, indeed, is fake and stems from anti-Christian ideological prejudices.

⁸ See the various editions, with constant up-dating, of *Se li conosci li eviti* (If You Know Them You Avoid Them) by Peter Gomez and Marco Travaglio, Milan: Chiarelettere.

From the historical and journalistic standpoint it has now been ascertained that the birth of Berlusconi's original party, "Forza Italia," took place against the background of negotiations between elements of the State apparatus and the Mafia "cupola." From the judicial standpoint there are sentences that openly endorse this hypothesis, but due to a lack of proof "beyond any reasonable doubt" there have been no convictions. Meanwhile evidence has come to light of covert secret service activities in a first attempt on the life of Giovanni Falcone and mountains of evidence is piling up on the reasons for the assassination of Paolo Borsellino (precisely because he wanted to oppose the negotiations between the State and the Mafia that led to the birth of "Forza Italia"). For that matter, three Prosecuting Attorney's offices are still investigating the "mysteries" of that decisive two-year period: 1992, with the assassinations of Falcone and Borsellino and their escorts; 1993, with the murderous attacks on the artistic heritage of Rome and Florence (and the massacre that failed—at the last minute—at the Olympic Stadium in Rome). The underworld character of Berlusconi's entourage has by now gone far beyond the imagination of Bertolt Brecht, with his Mackie Messer.

If with respect to crime and morality the literary model is Brecht, with respect to communication as manipulation it is Orwell. The Berlusconian television system has made the nightmare of "newspeak"—the instrument with which the Big Brother of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* kept the masses from thinking—come true. The fire power of television bends the meaning of words into their opposites. By now it has become "common knowledge" that the magistrates who incriminate Berlusconi and his friends are "politicized magistrates" (exactly the opposite is true). That a television monopoly is the apotheosis of the "free market." That asking for respect for the Constitution is equivalent to stirring up hate. (In the Italian political struggle, with the close of the season of terrorism an almost Anglo-Saxon fair play was the rule. It was Berlusconi who broke it, criminalizing his opponents and using a language halfway between the trivial and a war of religion.) That in Italy there is no economic crisis. That taxes have been reduced. That if they go up, the euro and the previous left-wing governments are to blame. That the mass media (his own included!) are dominated by "the Establishment" and by opposition journalism—that, again, "the Establishment," in cahoots with the Constitutional Court, violates the majority's right to govern (understood as the right to "do whatever it pleases"). The list goes on and on.

Berlusconi is the incarnation of Big Brother not only in the Orwellian sense, but also in the sense of the TV saga of that name. As for the first sense, he not only realizes the *Nineteen Eighty-Four* model in "newspeak" but also imitates the appalling demands of the "Ministry of Love." I am not exaggerating or polemicizing. Berlusconi has in fact christened his own organization as the "party of love," branding the center-left (plus the magistrates and free journalism) as the "party of hate." And with this Manichean invention he has unleashed a veritable tidal wave of fanaticism—rituals of enthusiasm

and devotion worthy of Ceausescu,⁹ replete with slogans and songs and other cachinnations every time he makes a public appearance. His party hymn, for that matter, is titled, with frugal modesty, "Thank heavens there's Silvio!".

Of Big Brother in the TV sense he realizes the apotheosis of illusion passed off as reality; i.e., of a presumed "reality" on live TV that in truth follows the script of the *dreams* established by the regime, despite the fact that beyond the artificial stage sets there are nothing but ruins. It is what occurred, for example, with the "reconstruction" after the Aquila earthquake.¹⁰

In this counterfeiting of democracy it is obvious that political debate loses any residual moorings in rational argumentation. "Facts" no longer exist, but neither is anyone held any longer to the bonds of logic. One can deny today what one affirmed yesterday, and in the course of a single talk show hold one opinion and the contrary opinion, one opinion and the opposite of the consequences that logically derive from it. What counts is the capacity to howl interrupting an opponent, histrionics, shamelessness in lying, the arrogance of a "good-looking presence" and of the vulgarity of an insult landed at the right moment. The entire panoply of semantic and pragmatic fallacies stigmatized in the treatises of rhetoric is now considered a "virtue."

Unreasoning becomes second nature for the politician but also for the voter. Indeed, the voter, in the politician's contempt for facts and logic, is prey to the fascination of the "will to power." A contempt that—acclaimed rather than unmasked—overflows into a "delusion of omnipotence" for the politician, and a delight in submission for the ex-citizen.

5

So, Berlusconi's regime is not Fascism. But it is certainly a new and unprecedented form of destruction of liberal-democratic institutions and of the minimum public ethos that sustains them. Let it be clear, we are completely neglecting here his economic and social policy, the exponential growth of inequality, the devastation of welfare, the polarization of wealth, because these are phenomena that are undermining and wearing down all western democracies. Here we are dealing only with the *liberal* aspect of modern democracies, in the traits that ought to be unrenounceable—both for the right and for the left.

Berlusconi is hollowing out one of the best liberal-democratic constitutions in the world, replacing a system of controls of legitimacy, of balance of powers, of inalienable rights of the individual, with the despotic will of one who—once he has obtained an electoral majority—is therewith "the Lord's Anointed." But the majority as a principle that authorizes everything, unlimitedly, is a Jacobin principle. It is the opposite of liberal democracy, of the "limited government" of Jefferson and Madison. So, wishing to lend historical no-

⁹ We note that his closest "comrade-in-arms," Fedele Confalonieri, faithful (*fedele*) in name and in deed, once described him—seriously—as "a good Ceausescu."

¹⁰ As is recounted in the extraordinary film by Sabina Guzzanti *Draquila*, acclaimed at Cannes.

bility to a regime of sheer profiteering we could describe Berlusconi's regime as Jacobinism of the wealthy, reactionary Jacobinism, Vendée Jacobinism.

It boils down to this: Berlusconi wants to reduce democracy not to plebiscite but to opinion poll, where every "citizen" is isolated and devoid of any cultural and social instrument for his or her effective independence, defenseless before a mass media-story telling—patronage based power without counterbalances and the "Man sent by Providence" who incarnates it. For Berlusconi public life is nothing but a grand arena for admen and touts, a gigantic souk. Or if you prefer, Berlusconi conceives of the State on a company scale, democracy as a firm (his firm!), where instead of citizens there are employees and/or consumers, a reference shareholder and a few minority shareholders, and where the decisions of the Managing Director cannot be held up or delayed. This is why for his tycoon mentality (the tycoon he became—and let us never forget it!—thanks to the political support of Bettino Craxi!) such things as the separation of powers, limited government, and insuperable constitutional restraints are truly incomprehensible and unreasonable. The Berlusconi regime is not Fascism, but only because what it is actually creating is a post-modern version of the "Ancien Régime" patrimonial State.

Now, however, this regime is crossing the threshold that divides the hollowing out of the constitution from its out-and-out subversion. As I write there is a scorching clash in the country over laws that would constitute a first element of full-fledged Fascism. One of them, which sought to prevent the use of wiretaps (let me make this clear: requested by a first magistrate and authorized by a second) in investigations for almost all offenses,¹¹ and which would sentence journalists to one month in prison, and publishers to astronomical fines (nearly a half million euros) for *each* publication of the few wiretaps still allowed (in essence, tied hands for magistrates and gags plus handcuffs for journalists: impunity and silence), was withdrawn only after months of popular mobilization, and due to the certainty that the President of the Republic would have refused to countersign it.¹²

Hence, that Berlusconism is not (yet) Fascism must not reassure us. Fascism is not the only way of burying democratic society, it is the historically determined way in which this came about in Europe from the early 1920s. There can be—and will be—other ways: for ill, history has always been highly inventive. Berlusconi's way has already proved to be an unprecedented form of the destruction of democracy. We can only wonder whether, under this regime, Italy—less than a century after the birth of Italian Fascism—constitutes

¹¹ Also for Mafia crimes, for which theoretically the limits do not apply. Rarely, in fact, is "Mafia association" discovered directly, as the result, for example, of a murder or assassination. It is almost always discovered by investigating crimes such as extortion, or rigged contracts, or money laundering—investigations in which wiretaps are crucial, and which this new law would eliminate.

¹² Article 17 of the Constitution states: "The President of the Republic, before promulgating a law, can with a message to the Houses with due cause ask for a new resolution. If the Houses approve the law once again, then it must be promulgated."

a fresh avant-garde laboratory for a degenerative process that could infect Europe once again.

Marx, correcting Hegel, maintained that the facts and the personalities of history do present themselves twice—but the first time as tragedy and the second as farce. And then history immediately belied him, since the "farce" of Napoleon "the Little" led France to the tragedy of the war and the defeat with Prussia, and led the French bourgeoisie to the bloody and bloodthirsty repression of the Paris Commune, an unimpeachable popular reaction to that defeat.

So Europe would do well not to indulge—with the made-up "Mussolini the Little" of Arcore¹³—in reassuring and illusory minimalism. For many years now, when Berlusconi speaks, Europe has focused mainly on his roguish character, on his cabaret behavior at international summits, on the ridiculousness of his hair transplants and face-lifts, on the wishful boasting of a third-rate Casanova, on the banality and vulgarity of stale jokes that make only their teller laugh. Since the personage is not serious, Europe thought it didn't have to take seriously the *democratic destruction* that between a quip and a jest the "clown of Europe," as *l'Express* described him in its cover-story in July of 2009,¹⁴ is effectively accomplishing. But when in a European democracy a farcical personage can amass enormous power, the prank has already become a calamity. And not only for the people subject to it, who in any case are guilty, but also for the rest of a Europe that irresponsibly limits itself to banter and irony, instead of taking the urgent measures to eradicate the virus of the anti-democracy that threatens to infect it.

6

Where Europe is right is when it asks the Italians to *explain* the enigma of Berlusconi's consensus. Why does his avowed war against the Constitution win approval? What drives half the Italian population to this delight in "voluntary servitude"? Actually there is no mystery. The explanations are simple, but for this very reason are often rejected. Let's take them one by one, starting with the "structural" interests that Berlusconi's anti-democracy protects and promotes.

Berlusconi is the self-proclaimed propagator of all freedoms. But then he sows so "freely" and "liberally" (in word and on video) contempt for all minorities, be they sexual, ethnic, or political. And when the insult comes from the apex of executive power it is more than a threat, because some will interpret it as a go-ahead for violence (it is not fortuitous that the increase in attacks on homosexuals is becoming endemic). Berlusconi in fact hates liberal freedoms, which safeguard minorities—all the way (down) to that extreme minority constituted by the single individual, the individual *dissident*. Berlusconi is a paladin exclusively of "were-freedom,"¹⁵ in which only "most"

¹³ Berlusconi's stately mansion near Milan.

¹⁴ "Enquête sur le bouffon de l'Europe BERLUSCONI," no. 3027, July 2009.

¹⁵ "Were" as in the expression "werewolf."

have the right to protection, because the "most" strong. With the inevitable "next" step (indeed, more simultaneous than next): freedom exclusively of who "has the most." The only freedom Berlusconi knows is that of the animal spirits of unregulated capitalism. Proprietary freedom as cannibal freedom, *homo homini lupus*.

Since politicians and governments in all European states are to some extent corrupt, many think that the Italian case simply consists in a higher rate of robbery. This is a big mistake. The thievery of the government "gangs" is gigantic, unrestrained, systematic, all-pervasive, and so sure of impunity that it exhibits itself with brazen arrogance. It is not fortuitous that in Italy a kilometer of highway or of subway or of "high speed" railway costs two or three or five times more than in France or in Germany or in Spain. In Italy today Lenin's affirmation that the State is the "executive committee of the bourgeoisie" is not true only because this Italian government is an executive committee of *illicit* affairs, criminality in the form of State.

This savage license for unrestrained privilege wins popular approval first of all through the mass diffusion of privilege—illegality—impunity. The amnesties for infringements of building regulations and the amnesties for unpaid taxes, for example. The effects are devastating for the successive generations, but in the meantime hosts of persons have been co-opted in the immediate interest of the violation of laws. A real Bacchanal of this "were-freedom" was the law on the re-entry of capital from abroad, which reduced the tax on undeclared profits to 5% (without the "generosity" of the law it would have been up to ten times higher) and guaranteed absolute anonymity and the impossibility of investigating the origin of those capitals—a stunning case of State-perpetrated money laundering! As for the recurrent build-regulation amnesties, they destroy what is left of Italy's historical natural wealth, the natural beauty of its landscapes.

Thus the principle of impunity for the powerful is made popular by the mirage of mass participation protected by a code of silence. The effects on the public ethos can easily be imagined. In point of fact the privilege of unpunished illegality is not like "the loaves and the fishes": the multiplication must know limits, if the country is not to end up like Greece on the edge—or over the edge—of default. This land of plenty of mass illegality, whose wealth will by its nature be spread in a way that is abysmally asymmetric, is therefore fostered by a demagogic of the dream and of the enemy, heightened without restraint by television. The permanent Christmas presents of promises. We cannot even attempt to list them—TV promises the moon a hundred times a day, a veritable "vie en rose" with hypnotic results for the cathodic agora of housewives and pensioners who live *in* television.

And then we have the listing of enemies denounced as "plague spreaders" who keep the "roses" from blooming. Berlusconi calls them "communists," despite the fact that communism has been extinct for over a generation, and for anyone under thirty is as phantom as the "bow-wow" of infancy. But it serves to give the phantasmagoric density of "Evil" to anything that can

limit or oppose his power (Berlusconi, the bestower of "Good" par excellence). From the magistrates and journalists who do their duty to the revenue offices that track down tax evaders. Indeed, he has accused "the communists" of wanting to create a "revenue-police State,"¹⁶ despite the fact that the last center-left government "fought" tax evasion with white gloves and the highest respect (for the evaders). In short, for Berlusconi "communism" signifies the equality of all citizens before taxes and laws—the historical and theoretical ABC of liberal democracies.

7

We still have to speak of the other aspect that explains the enigma. This aspect is even more banal—so banal that foreign observers don't want to believe in it. Namely, the overwhelming *stupidity* of the opposition leaders—when it isn't downright *complicity*, which is often the case.

The facts. Berlusconi was defeated twice, in 1996 and in 2006. And he could have been defeated ever since he "threw his hat into the ring," in 1994, when all the polls insisted that the center-left would have been far ahead if only the democratic line-up had fielded an independent candidate instead of the last Secretary of the Italian Communist Party, Achille Occhetto. Fatal vanity. Berlusconi ran a campaign under the banner of the most traditional anti-communism, and in alliance with the Northern League and the ex-Fascists won by a whisker. But two years later came his clash with the League, and new elections were called. It sufficed for the center-left to nominate a non-ex-communist, Romano Prodi (nothing special, but a respected economist and a "Vatican II" Catholic) and they won by a landslide. For Berlusconi it looked like the end. Not only political, but also entrepreneurial, and even personal. Look at the newspapers of the time: they ask who will take Berlusconi's place as leader of the right ("who," not "if someone"); when his companies, overburdened with astronomical debt, will declare bankruptcy ("when," not "if"); which investigation, of the many already ongoing for very serious crimes, will send him to prison ("which," not "if an").

But then we had the stroke of genius of Massimo D'Alema, Occhetto's successor as Secretary of the ex-PCI: instead of doing what it took to kick Berlusconi definitively off the field (it would have sufficed to do nothing at all!) he proposed that, together, they should play the role of Fathers of a "refounded" Constitution, in the demented conviction that Berlusconi was the weakest of all possible adversaries—and therefore to be safeguarded! We know the rest: canonized by the ex-PCI as a "Constituent Father," Berlusconi reassured leadership of his political cohorts, found opulent bank credits, and obtained bipartisan laws that kept him out of prison. And so, in 2001, he won the election. But he governed so badly that two months before the election of 2006 Prodi was twenty points ahead in the polls. But, then, the center-left

¹⁶ Literally. For that matter, on another occasion he encouraged tax evasion in an official declaration, broadcast by all the TV stations.

election campaign proved to be a masterpiece of stupidity and masochism, and in the end its victory came by only a few thousand votes. What is more, thanks to the electoral law, while its majority in the House was substantial, in the Senate it was only of a couple of seats. But this was only because the center-left had rejected the support of the independent (left) "regional civic lists" that were already there for the asking in almost all regions of the country, and credited with results—depending on the area—of between 3 and 12%. The center-left leaders explained that a success of the "civic lists" would have represented a "political problem." In translation: better to lose, continuing to control monopolistically "their" constituency, than win with the support of a part of "civil society." In this way the second Prodi government, hostage to former allies of Berlusconi's who had changed camps out of sheer opportunism, fell two years later.

In short, there has never been a more *resistible* rise to power than that of Silvio B.

For that matter, in their seven years in power the center-left governments did absolutely nothing different from the Berlusconi regimes regarding the two issues that have dominated Italian politics since 1992: justice and television.¹⁷ And when they have been in the opposition—an evanescent opposition—the center-left's primary concern has been with keeping the autonomous movements of civil society, which twice brought over a million people into the streets,¹⁸ from being transformed into an organized political force.

Berlusconi, by contrast, has proved capable of intercepting the wave of "anti-politics" that is traversing society and of presenting himself as the alternative to the professional politicians, something no one on the left has thus far been capable of doing. Indeed, the left has continued to condemn the growing feeling of indignation and anger directed against the political class as a manifestation of "non-commitment" (*qualunquismo*) (i.e., of indifference towards politics and social problems). Still, this contempt for the "caste"¹⁹ is ambivalent, it can take on the features of sirens for the strongman or for an authoritarian government, but today it more often expresses the will to a radically more democratic politics, close to the citizens and controlled by them. Journalistic laziness describes it as "anti-politics," but, rather, it is "anti-partyism"—opposition to party power, to the supreme rule of political parties—and asks for "more politics," and its restitution to the citizens.

¹⁷ It is not fortuitous that today Berlusconi's only real opposition seems to be coming from Gianfranco Fini, co-founder with Berlusconi of the "Freedom People" party, now on a collision course and beginning to acknowledge the validity of all the criticisms of the "Little Duce of Arcore" that I have been making for years, but who to date has not yet left the government.

¹⁸ In September of 2002 with the "Girotondi" (on the initiative of Nanni Moretti, Pancho Pardi, and myself), and in November of 2009 with the "Purple People" rallied by means of Facebook—both times in Piazza San Giovanni in Rome.

¹⁹ The term became popular after the resounding success (over a million copies sold) of the book *La Casta* (The Caste), in which the journalists of *Corriere della sera* Rizzo and Gian Antonio Stella analyze all the privileges connected with the tens and tens of thousands of politicians in Italy (from Parliament to the small towns).

Democracy founded on the monopoly of career politicians has in fact transformed the public sphere into a private sphere, the activity of representation into a self-referential trade, whose measure is the personal profit that can be made from it. In this situation the relationship between representative and represented is reversed. The "represented" do not feel they are represented at all, they feel they can choose only between more or less complete "alienations" of their will. It is not by chance that voter participation has fallen, and even when it remains high the citizens declare in the polls of the day after their total lack of confidence in the people they have just elected: "they're all the same," "one is as good (or bad) as the other," "bonnet blanc et blanc bonnet"—and then, "they all steal anyhow."

Political life has become *exclusively* a career, within a circuit of investment-consensus-profit-new investment. If we fail to tackle the key issue of "partyism," if we don't develop a strategy to reduce it to a minimum, the alternative will be between two forms of taking leave of democracy: either partyism or populist-authoritarianism. The left parties in existence today (the social democracies and other laughable third ways) are incapable of tackling the problem or even just of posing it, precisely because they are an integral and *structural* part of the problem itself. This is why they were incapable of taking advantage of a financial crisis that offered the friends' of equality fantastic cards to play. It demonstrated, in fact, from the standpoint of *efficiency*—the capitalist divinity par excellence—the necessity of a radical transformation, beginning with a democratic storming of the Bastille of a "free" finance. The left, in short, is farther and farther from its potential voters, who rightfully cry out for *more* "equality and liberty."

On the right, by contrast, reactionaries and conservatives are capable of playing on the two tables of partyist hollowing and constitutional subversion. And yet the left would prevail if only it would present itself—even in homeopathic doses—as extraneous to the rites of the partyist drift.²⁰ In Europe today the victor will be the one who is capable of occupying the strategic casemate of anti-politics. Leaving it to the new right parties brimming with racist resentment is the crime the left parties are committing. Because they are compromised to the marrow in the interests of the establishment.

8

Some might continue to think that Berlusconi constitutes little more than an emphasis of the defects of all shades of the European right. It would be blindness.

The "were-freedom" of privilege, the Jacobinism of the optimates, is depicted by Berlusconi's mass-media despotism as guaranteeing the defense of civil liberties against the "police-like" and "inquisitorial" vocation—in short, the incurable Stalinism—of the "communists." The law prescribing "hands tied for magistrates and gags for journalists" is presented as the protection of privacy.

²⁰ Jospin, Zapatero, Prodi.

This is the legend. The reality, however, is a police regime, but against "the last," the weak, the meek. Today in Italy there are full-fledged concentration camps for migrants from outside the European Union, the prisons are swarming with small-time dealers and Mafia underlings—but the criminality of contracts, of fraud and financial money laundering, of political corruption, of "friendly" industrial espionage and, finally, of "double-breasted" organized crime (the people really in command), is now *protected* by the law. Class justice is transformed from the practice of power into a legal order.

All this is catastrophic for the social fabric. Every law promulgated to ensure the immunity of "friends" and "friends of friends" reverberates its effects of impunity in a broader sphere of crime, since a law *perfectly* based on class, which discriminates by income and status, is not (yet?) possible. The Mafias in Italy have never been so tenderly "cuddled" as they have been by the Berlusconi governments. Lying through its teeth, the regime rants to the four winds that the Mafia has never been fought harder and more effectively—but meanwhile Berlusconi hurls a curse against Saviano's novel *Gomorra* for allegedly defaming and besmirching Italy. In a word: legality is the enemy. All the more when the interweaving of politics/business/crime begins to assert itself as a structural characteristic of much of Europe. Also from this point of view Italy, in pursuit of Putin's Russia, risks setting the pace for the other Western democracies.

But note the paradox: the right has historically been the "law and order" party. It is the left that has been accused of permissiveness and "sociological" justificationism regarding criminals, while the right has waved the banner of zero tolerance. From this perspective Berlusconi is at first blush the world (of the right) upside-down. But in fact he signals a profound transformation: once the magistracy—fully independent of political (and financial) power—can apply zero tolerance, or at least its rudiments, we come close to what the establishment abhors: the drastic material—as well as legal—reduction of privilege itself. Democratic legality, if it is consistent, is the power of the powerless.

Berlusconi, then, probably represents the right-wing of the future, which will not be able to tolerate, even in principle, politico-juridical equality, if it risks becoming reality. A right that will have to *constitutionalize* privilege, to give legal form to the society of the new castes. Putin's Russia, with its oligarchs and its Mafias, and its journalists in danger of their lives, and an enslaved magistracy, is the prototype. Precisely this is why Europe risks more than ever the infection of Berlusconism, this Putinism cut out for the West. The blood-curdling Putin model has been exorcized as the unsuccessful transition in Russia from totalitarianism to democracy. But now in Italy one celebrates the regression from democracy to the risk of an unprecedented totalitarianism. Minimizing becomes self-destruction.

We have already mentioned that in Berlusconism another historical ingredient of Fascism flourishes: namely, clericalism. The aversion to secularity, which, moreover, constitutes a side effect of the hatred of critical thought. Like Fascism, Berlusconism is ready to pay homage to the most mortifying

forms of the hierarchical Church, to serve it with all the gifts of mammon and to translate into law all the illiberal monstrosities of its bioethics. Provided that the Church, maternally, is willing to absolve in advance and muffle in silence the weakness of the flesh (always the same: money and sex) of the regime that does so much for the "true religion." But if the Church, ungrateful, dares to criticize it, Church leaders, too, will be subjected to Mafia methods.²¹ Clericalism in a postmodern version, in any case: genuflection and homage to morality hand-in-hand with licentious vulgarity on the television screens, because "business is business" and audience is not won with "pater, ave e gloria."

Let us draw some conclusions. None of Berlusconi's acts, taken in isolation, can be accused of turning democracy into its opposite. All western governments, more or less, are addicted to the gap between the poetry of constitutions and the prose of the action of power. What is decisive, however, is precisely the degree of this "more or less." Umberto Eco—though he has never participated in the more radical and consistent engagement of (a few) other intellectuals against Berlusconism—is right when he says: "When a transformation of the institutions of the Country come about step by step, i.e., by homeopathic doses, it is hard to say that each one, taken on its own, prefigures a dictatorship [...] Can one say that the "Lodo Alfano"²² prefigures a tyranny? Nonsense. And is the restriction on wire-taps really an attack on the freedom of information? Come on now [...] The function of the ongoing coups d'état is that the constitutional modifications practically never be perceived. And when their sum will have produced the Third Republic it will be too late because the majority will have absorbed the changes as natural and the people will have been, so to speak, mithridatized."²³

Berlusconism is not Fascism. But only because it is the functional and postmodern equivalent of Fascism. Because it constitutes the destruction of liberal democracy in the conditions of the new millennium, in the epoch of the dominion of the image, of the globalization of commodities, and of the unrestrained manipulation of truth.

Translated from the Italian by Giacomo Donis

²¹ Sensational was the case of Dino Boffo, editor of the newspaper of the Italian Bishop's Conference *L'avvenire*, who criticized—with extreme caution—Berlusconi's sexual behaviors. *Il Giornale*, a paper owned by the Berlusconi family, published a false "legal document" accusing him of homosexuality and of sexual offences for which—it claimed—he had plea bargained the sentence.

²² The "Alfano Law," named after Berlusconi's Minister of Justice Angelino Alfano, was a law, in force between 2008 and 2009, granting immunity from prosecution to the four highest political offices in Italy (one, evidently, being that of the Prime Minister). Its principal aim was stopping trials involving Berlusconi. It was declared unconstitutional in October 2009.

²³ *L'Espresso*, 28 May 2010.