

It is not always easy to explain our country to foreigners. In Italy the slowest trains are called "fast" and the evening news come out in the morning.
(Giulio Andreotti)

"Italy Is the country I love", with these words Silvio Berlusconi opens his first public speech in 1994 "here I have my roots, my hopes, my horizons. Here I learned, from my father and from life, the craft of entrepreneurship, here I also learned the passion for freedom."

Ever since childhood I have been amazed at how such a man could keep ruling in my country, how in every historical moment I can remember his image would be there: his bright smile, his open arms to embrace the crowd; reassuring as a father, charming as an experienced lover.

I have often wondered, as many others, what his secret might be; in these past years, he managed to discredit every scandal, dismiss national and international criticism and win the hearts of Italians with his unique manipulation of media and of his personal image.

It is not an isolated phenomenon, in all democratic countries politicians skillfully play with their image in the media; B. is but the highest example of how, to quote him again, «there's two kinds of reality [...] there's the true one, the one of the people, of the common people; and the one newspapers describe, which is not reality but pure invention.»

[«Ci sono due tipi di realtà [...] C'è quella vera, della gente, della gente comune; e la realtà che i giornali descrivono, che non è la realtà ma pura fantasia.»]

(L'Aquila, G8, press conference, July 9 2009. from YouTube/Sky Tg24:

<http://bit.ly/aCrLWw>)

This essay is an attempt to explain and analyze how B.'s politics of affect managed to charm his countrymen and averted their eyes from matters of importance.

the populist hypothesis

Of all the theories about populism, few details are common in the different explanations: populism is about the masses, the crowds, as opposed to economical, cultural and political elites.

B. is particularly famous for being loved by the public; in numerous occasions, proud of the numbers that proved him to be loved by the majority of Italians, he has worn this status like a badge of pride.

Populism is based on common sense, on pragmatism, all qualities that B., son of housewife and a bank employee, seems fit to incarnate. His position of political *homo novus* embodies the hopes and dreams of the uneducated lower class. He is the living example that the oligarchy of bourgeois élite can and will be overturned. "Italy is the country I love" who wouldn't identify? Where other aspiring leaders would express their plans to a party conference, he aims directly to the people, creating from the very beginning a direct line with his voters.

His original and unexpected tactic is designed to take distance from the previous political system, seen as unreliable, and sunk under the weight of scandal and corruption during the judicial investigation "Mani Pulite" in 1990.

Against the inefficiency of his political opponents he offers his experience as a businessmen, the self-made entrepreneur that could lead a country as successfully as he lead his companies.

His opposition to the previous political élites, portrays him as a populist manipulator that plays with the emotion of the crowds, he provides simple explanations in a complex and sophisticated world.

Standing on top of a political clean slate B. makes a number of promises:

He promises "a political force made by completely new men", or again "a government program made by concrete and understandable efforts", "we want to give sustenance and trust to the ones who produce work and wealth, we want accept and win the big technological challenges of Europe and of the modern world". Again, who wouldn't agree?

Appointing generic and crowd-pleasing themes has always been at the core of political discourse, and B. is not an exception, however his inclination to forget the promises he made has always gone completely unnoticed.

the media empire

It is certainly unpleasant that, in a democratic country, exists a man that owns almost all the private TV channels, since the 1980s, and controls almost completely the public television, being in charge of the government; a man that is

also publisher of relevant magazines and newspapers.

In B.'s opinion all of this is not a problem: "after becoming prime minister in 1994 he declared it would be "anomalous" for a country to have a state television that did not support the government elected by the people; a month later he removed the RAI's directors and replaced them with nominees of his own." [2011, D. Gilmour, *The Pursuit of Italy*]

There is little doubt that B.'s influence over state and private media played a great role in the control he had over the public opinion, but I always found it too easy an answer.

I am indeed convinced that, as Giulio Andreotti famously put it, "the situation is a bit more complex" [<http://youtu.be/QcK4xN3uQ7k>]

Controlling television has not only been important to determine the public's political opinion, but also to understate corruption, hide the embarrassment, omit problems and misdeeds.

"Television is important for the questions that does not pose, for the critiques that does not offer, for the scandals that does not report; for the characters that creates, preserves, destroys or forgets". [2011, B. Severgnini - *La pancia degli italiani*]

Recent figures* show that the people that inform themselves through newspapers, books, cable TV, web editions of newspapers, are about 5 millions, compared to the 20,4 millions that follow the evening edition of the news.

That said, a clarification seems necessary: Italians are not very prone to learning English, if on one hand local televisions and newspapers may be biased, it remains very difficult to gain access to different sources of information, lacking the knowledge of foreign languages.

It is in the best interest of B.'s government not to invest in education, and specifically higher education; the recent extreme cuts to university and culture prove the obvious line of thought: as long as Italians remain trapped in the island of Italian culture, they won't feel the need to reach out to external (foreign) sources of information.

B. understood that the mass doesn't want criticism but reassurance, is not interested in problems but, as spectators of his TV programs, are looking for a plot. B. skillful writer and director gives them entertainment.

Bottom line, that's what Italian Television is mainly about: entertainment.

Entertainment as opposed to information, criticism, dialogue, political discourse. But B. is not a dictator, and does not use dictatorial methods to reach his goals- he really dreams of a brighter future. He would love a country with flourishing cities, fast and reliable public transport, vivacious happy families with quiet children, he tells all about it in his promo video *Meno male che Silvio c'è* Thank goodness that Silvio's here [<http://youtu.be/wxf-YbSsh0Y>].

His dream, his mission that can be accomplished only through hard work and sacrifice, a matter could appear unpleasant; it is easier to profess optimism and faith in the future, than concretely improve the present.

"In a battle of words, slogans, jokes, funny stories and promises, for fifteen years *Il Cavaliere* managed to bewitch Italians, hypnotizing them with media therapy and preaching to the four winds optimism, faith, and the foresight of a better future. Up until now the majority of Italians believed in him as you would believe a prophet, a guru, a mentor".

[a colpi di parole, slogan, barzellette, storielle e promesse, da quindici anni a questa parte il Cavaliere è riuscito ad incantare gli italiani, ipnotizzandoli con la terapia mediatica e predicando ai quattro venti l'ottimismo, la fiducia, l'aspettativa di un futuro migliore. E finora la maggioranza degli italiani gli ha creduto come si crede ad un profeta, a un guru, a un santone".] (2009 G.

Valentini - *La Sindrome di Arcore*)

While populace is satisfied with empty promises of a better future, what happens to who would rather focus on the present, talk about what *really* happens?

the "dirt machine"

"if you put yourself against certain powers, if you put yourself against the government, you can only expect a machine that throws dirt at you: an attack that begins with tiny element of your private life that are used against you". [Roberto Saviano,

Quite obviously Italy is not a dictatorship, there is still freedom of expression, nobody gets incarcerated for what they write or publish; but playing with the confusion between information and defamation is the method used to discourage and

choke contrary voices.

Information uses an inquiry to gather as many elements as possible, and put them together: its goal is to dive into a subject in order to demonstrate, explain, shine light on an event.

Defamation happens instead when an element is taken out of context, a private detail that has nothing to do with a person's public life, and it is used against the person we want to attack.

The goal is to be able to say "we are all the equals", "we are all covered in dirt" "you'd do the same": if everybody is dirty, nobody is guilty.

It is a subtle mechanism and it is exactly what the crowd wants to hear: everybody has secrets, everybody has weaknesses, if you want yours to be condoned you must forgive everybody's.

In 2009, after publicly denouncing the "prostitutes situation" at B.'s residence in Rome, Palazzo Grazioli, Dino Boffo the director of catholic newspaper "L'Avvenire" was attacked by "Il Giornale" newspaper - owned by B.'s family - and forced to resign. The title in "Il Giornale" was: Boffo, the ultra-moralist condemned for sexual harrasment. [<http://bit.ly/qrwde8>] The article was reporting a document that proved Boffo to be accused sued for sexual harrasment by a married man that had allegedly had a relationship with him. The document turned out to be a false.

In 2010 Augusto Minzolini, director of the evening TV news program on channel 1 (state television) spent almost two months reporting daily about an investigation, taken from the same newspaper, "Il Giornale": an apartment in the Principauté de Monaco owned by B.'s party, was being rent to a relative of Gianfranco Fini, recently expelled from B.'s party.

These are the two most recent examples of the many who received denigrating treatments after they stepped on mr B.'s toes.

Then why this use (and abuse) of media does not appear shocking to the voters? Why very few people are wondering whether it is normal in a democratic country to see the people criticizing the government lapidated and then forgotten by the media?

playing with mirrors

"che bello essere italiani [...] perdonano e si perdonano tutti I vizi. Comprendono. Sono gli inventori delle attenuanti".

"how nice being Italian [...] you forgive and are forgiven all kind of vices. They understand. They are the inventors of the *extenuating circumstances*"

[2007, Giovanni Arpino - Azzurro Tenebra]

B. understood the importance of sympathy for the ones, like him, who want to be free to do, undo, invent, ignore, bypass an interpret laws at their will.

He understood the importance of individualism and by praising individualism he builds distrust towards what's "public" and "shared", disdain towards the rules and private satisfaction in finding a personal solution to a collective problem. Italians, rather than asking for a fairer and better tax system, prefer to sneak around the existing one.

B., on a press conference on the 17th of February 2004 declared: If the State asks me more than 50 percent [of my revenues] I feel it's unfair. I feel morally allowed to evade as much as I can".

Elsewhere, anywhere, it would be at least subversive to assert such a thing, on the contrary Italians see a reflection of their own private concerns, and silently approve - with the approval, comes forgiveness.

As mentioned earlier, B. does his best to condone and reproduce widespread attitudes. The idea that the media should be an independent entity is considered an ingenuity, an hypocrisy at best.

I can only begin to imagine people's faces, should Thomas Jefferson[letter to Edward Carrington, 1787] come to, say, Rome and declare

The basis of our governments being the opinion of the people, the very first object should be to keep that right; and were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter.

In the last nine years Berlusconi managed to:

- show the sign of the horns with his hands on an official photo (2002) [<http://bit.ly/qJymxX>]
- tell a German Member of the European Parliament that he would have proposed

him for the role of Kapò in a movie about concentration camps (2003) [<http://bbc.in/mUKQTM>]

- being photographed next to Tony Blair with a bandana on his head (2004) [<http://bit.ly/nSswjX>]
- show the middle finger in an electoral meeting (2005) [<http://youtu.be/6SZgEzxdcGI>]
- tell to have brushed up his playboy skills with the Finnish President Tarja Halonen (2005) [<http://bbc.in/qigumV>]
- claim that chinese maoists used to boil children to fertilize the soil (2006) [<http://bbc.in/eQY8Ze>]
- play peekaboo with Angela Merkel (2008) [<http://tgr.ph/aai3wd>]
- annoy Queen Elizabeth II shouting loudly during a photoshoot (2009) [<http://youtu.be/PFgCthVSUwo>]

where foreign press would laugh, Italians don't: they smile. Because he's human, so human...

But his spontaneity is highly calculated, he understands that foreign critics and the embarrassment of a certain portion of Italians boosts his popularity among the common people: after joking as he pleases, looking at the crowd, he notices he hit them right in the heart.

Perdono / Forgiveness

Forgiveness, again, is the key element and strangely enough the only explanation; for it is not logical, it is at the core of B.'s politics of affect. Forgiveness is in the hearts of people, in the heart of every good christian, it is a string that B. knows how and when to pull, beginning himself, to forgive.

I would like to conclude with my favorite example of forgiveness. Often when trying to understand my Country, I look towards ancient history, which always for me held answers, and consolation.

In the year 46 B.C. Caesar was winning the Civil war, and with that establishing a reign of absolutist power that would have ended the Republic in Rome. One of his opponents was [Marcus Porcius Cato](#), barricaded in the isle of Utica with his followers, refusing to give in.

His residence was in siege, and even his closest disciples were starting to lose hope - news arrived from Caesar that he would have gladly forgiven Cato and welcomed him back in Rome, provided he resigned and pledged fealty to his new reign.

Cato understood the deep shame that came with kneeling before a dictator, and calling him a rightful leader, so decided to commit suicide that April, by stabbing himself with his own sword. Plutarch, telling the story of Cato's death, says:

Cato did not immediately die of the wound; but struggling, fell off the bed, and throwing down a little mathematical table that stood by, made such a noise that the servants, hearing it, cried out. And immediately his son and all his friends came into the chamber, where, seeing him lie weltering in his own blood, great part of his bowels out of his body, but himself still alive and able to look at them, they all stood in horror. The physician went to him, and would have put in his bowels, which were not pierced, and sewed up the wound; but Cato, recovering himself, and understanding the intention, thrust away the physician, plucked out his own bowels, and tearing open the wound, immediately expired.

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