

Are you (we) stupid or what?

Jerry Krase (April 09, 2009)



Solving global and national crises requires accurate and timely information. Television news and information programming is little help in that regard.



Tom Verso's recent piece exalting Italian America's street corner roots made me nostalgic about my pre-college street corner days when I hung around with my mixed ethnic group of friends. As I recall, the Italian American ones were (according to themselves) the best informed, and when I disagreed the usual admonishment was "Are you stupid or what?" Which leads me to wonder about the source of ignorance.

For me, Will Rogers Jr (1911-1993), epitomized the well-informed American. The Cherokee-American cowboy was a well-known actor, humorist, and especially keen social commentator. Growing up with a crackly radio and a flickering, sometimes rolling, black and white television, I especially enjoyed his monologues focused on current events. He'd start by slowly drawling out "Well, what shall I talk about? I ain't got anything funny to say. All I know is what I read in the papers." Then he would intelligently vivisect one politician, issue, or incident thereby causing millions to nervously laugh at their own expense. Americans had to be well-informed then because you couldn't get the joke unless you knew what was going on in the world. Otherwise the joke was on you. Today it seems that "All I know is what I read in the papers." has been replaced with "All I know is what I see on television" and the joke really is on the viewer.

To understand why Americans were so easily taken by the likes of world champion Ponzi schemers Bernie Madoff, and Citigroup, one need only watch a few hours of CNBC's financial "news" and "information" programming. For example, CNBC's "dough-eyed" financial analyst Maria Bartiromo had to be defended by her employer about her relationship with a former Citigroup boss. www.msnbc.msn.com/id/16830375/ [2]. Then there is the lunacy of anyone taking Jim Cramer's investment advice on his "Mad Money" www.youtube.com/watch [3] that can only be matched by another CNBC stalwart, Rick Santelli's, foaming at the mouth about Obama's plan to bail out what amounts to CNBC's Fan Club members www.youtube.com/watch [4]. One can't help but believe that cable television's vast array of financial news and information programs amounts to 24/7 infomercials.

As to the reliability of other "competing" venerable television news sources, I note that after leaving CNN, Glen Beck was found crying about his passion to "save America" on his Fox News "The Glen Beck Show" where it is alleged viewers can find "The Fusion of entertainment and enlightenment." www.youtube.com/watch [5] As was true of Will Rogers Jr., millions are attracted to Glen's homey, self-deprecation. But, his "dis"- and "mis"-information leaves the likes of fellow dissemblers Sean Hannity, and, "ditto" I assume, Rush Limbaugh -- the other studs in the Fox stable of horse's -- to wonder if they should start showing more of their mare sides. It's still true that it's not what you say but how you say it that convinces audiences of reliability and validity of television "news and information."

Speaking of the news, from Left to the Right and everywhere in between, the Mass Media are scrutinizing every one of Barack Hussein Obama's utterances (not to mention Michelle's uncovered arms) as if they were the difference between life and death for America and the rest of the world. Obama goes to the G-20 in London and NATO in Prague where everyone (except Hillary Clinton) holds their breath waiting for the pearls of wisdom to fall from his lips. The media makes it appear as though everything depends on him alone. It may make good copy but little sense.

For my friends on the Left, allow me to deconstruct this Obama fascination which afflicts everyone, including the Right. Post-George "W," I think there has been too much intellectual, emotional, and other investment in the idea of "Obama-ism" which is a logical outcome of Obamania. Obamism is a belief that Barack H. has, as an individual, some special qualities that are more powerful than even Pre-Post-Modern structures such as International Capitalism and International Socialism. A case in point is that the current version of "the" Global Financial Crisis is herded over by 20 instead of the previous 8 masters (and mistresses) of the universe. And, at least one of them (maitre de l'univers French President Nicolas Sarkozy) threatened to make it 19 if Obama has his way with the rest,



which Obama did and Sarkozy didn't.

Then there are the closely related international conclaves that are simultaneously divining solutions to "the" Global Terrorism Crisis and "the" Global Poverty Crisis. Frankly speaking, as was true of the "expert" analyses leading up to the current Great Depression that served little purpose other than postpone the today of reckoning, no one (not even Richard Holbrooke Obama's Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan) really has a clue as to how to effectively deal with the organized and disorganized violence that is the result of ignoring the legitimate aspirations of ordinary people all around the globe. For the global crises experts social "justice" is, like a "derivative" something about which you speak without knowing what it is. In my opinion it is not that there are no answers to vexing problems but that we are asking the wrong questions about them. Most of the questions asked are constrained by the desire to maintain the status quo (status quo ante perhaps) in which "we" (the wealthy, powerful, superior, etc) are comfortable in our sense of entitlement.

To be fair, I really should offer at least one or two concrete (more or less) examples of this common sense (Krasian) approach to problem-solving-by-better-question-asking. Italy is faced with a "crisis" because thousands of Africans who are seeking work and minimal comfort are flooding their enticing shores. What makes them want to come is not what they find in Italy but what they can't find at home. If Italy and the rest of Europe returned to Africa only a tiny portion of the wealth that they harvested from Africa thereby impoverishing Africans, migrants would have little reason, or incentive, to risk their lives in rickety boats such as the two-hundred who recently drowned off the coast of Libya. www.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/africa/03/31/libya.boat.sinks/index.html [6]

In the United States of America, it is the swarming of Latinos across the borders that fuels the rise of American Fascism. Their for search work and economic opportunity has set off the alarms and raised the barriers to "free movement of capital and labor" as envisioned by NAFTA. In all these cases of allegedly "unwanted" but necessary migrations, it would make better sense for the invaded countries to guarantee decent wages for their global migrant workforce. This would not only help increase the remittances to home countries (indirect foreign aid) it would also eventually reduce reliance on exploitive labor importation by increasing the influence of local workers and unions whose labor would be more in demand.

Asking and answering better questions about the plethora of Global Crises we have today might not keep baby-faced Glen Beck from prime time crying, or Karl Rove from drooling on the editorial pages of the Fox News version of The Wall Street Journal for that matter. But Will Rogers Jr. would've loved it, and not inconsequentially the joke would stop being on us all the time.

Allow me here to liberally excerpt from George de Stefano's recent I-Italy Magazine report on Paul Ginsborg analysis of opposition to Berlusconi "Denuncia: Speaking Up in Modern Italy" where Ginsborg observed that "A regime and its opposition are intimately linked."

"In a generally dismal political environment, there are social forces and actors who could present an effective opposition. These include those Italians who make up what Ginsborg called 'i ceti medi riflessivi,' progressive, civic-minded members of the educated, urban middle class. ...The other source of opposition, Ginsborg said, can be found in Italian civil society associations that operate "between the family and the state."'Is there any hope?' Ginsborg rhetorically asked near the conclusion of his talk. 'The simple answer is that given the nature of the regime it's very tough to organize" an effective opposition. But there are "many forces, among the middle and working classes, that are just crying out for coordination and movement.' But who will provide that coordination, that mobilization of unorganized opposition into a movement, and how? That's a question Paul Ginsborg, modestly and wisely, did not attempt to answer. "



In Italy, Silvio Berlusconi's state and private control of television helps to keep the opposition in the shadows, if not the dark. Ironically, it is being challenged by none other than America's own (by naturalization) Fox and Sky owner Rupert Murdoch. Come si dice in italiano "out of the frying pan and into the fire?"

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