

A Week in Politics, Italian Style

Judith Harris (October 15, 2009)



Italy's political discourse today is particularly interesting to me as a foreign journalist, but also as a writer...

ROME - the movie that has Italians and foreigners talking—and gasping and laughing away a bitter tear or two—is a political documentary called “Videocracy.” It has won prizes and, while even ads for it are banned from being broadcast on state-owned RAI TV, it is circulating in some Italian cinemas. The work of a Swedish-based Italian from Bergamo named Eric Gandini, 42, it begins with a strip tease in a stage-set Milanese cafe, to enthusiastic applause from a handful of ordinary-looking slob. The strippers are unprofessional, unsexy housewives, doing awkward bumps and grinds as part of a game show. This would be beneath anyone’s radar screen except for one fact: these embarrassing amateur strippers starred in a show produced by the proto-TV Berlusconi network in Milan in the Seventies. They raised the curtain on the historic birth of trash TV Italian style, and also of the Silvio Berlusconi media empire.

Fast forward to last week in Italy, whose high court just stripped the Italian Premier of his immunity from prosecution while in office, an immunity that existed thanks only to a bespoke law called the “Lodo Alfano,” now overturned by a vote of 9 to 6. In that vote two judges considered conservative broke ranks to vote against, and two considered progressives voted for maintaining the “Lodo,” thus leaving scant justifications for allegations that the immunity stripping was part of the ongoing “plot” which Signor Berlusconi believes has the world against him. This plot hatched by his “opposers”—the word “opponents” has also been stripped from the Partito della Liberta’ political lexicon—is the work of foreign media, elite parasites and local Communists.

The eighty lawyers who prepared the Premier’s defense, led by Nicolò Ghedini, acknowledged that everyone, even a president of the council of ministers, is equal under the law in Italy, but still the application of the law can be stripped away, depending upon that individual’s status.

My own first question was: what the heck is a “lodo”? The good folks at the Encyclopedia Treccani explained that the word comes from the Latin root LAUDUM, meaning lodare or to laud someone, i.e., to give approval. A lodo is therefore a collegial decision or judgment that, however, needs ratification from a praetor. Alfano was the name of Berlusconi’s Justice Minister Angelino Alfano, and the law came into being in 2008; a previous law along the same lines, known as the Lodo Schifani, had been declared unconstitutional in October 2009. It was therefore not much of a surprise that not even a berlusconi of lawyers could cook up an argument to maintain his immunity from prosecution.

Berlusconi, needless to say, is outraged and has gone so far as to intimate that revelations about the private life of the chief justice who made the decision can be expected. No less seriously, he has blamed Italian President Giorgio Napolitano for essentially betraying him by having signed into law the “lodo” in the first place, a charge which Napolitano denies with his customary dignity.

And yet prosecutions there will be, one involving British banker David Mills, already convicted in Milan for accepting Berlusconi bribes in exchange for giving false testimony concerning business funds. A second case involves allegations of false accounting in the purchase of TV rights by Mediaset and a third, underhanded means for stripping Mondadori publishing interests from Carlo De Benedetti; that latter case has already whacked Berlusconi with a gigantic fine. Against a background of sexy sleaze and party girls, it is not a pretty picture.

Berlusconi has two defenses. The first is that the Parliament, still solidly in his favor, is likely to push forward the date for praescription, meaning that if enough time is wasted before all this comes to trial, most will fizzle out. The second is to accuse anyone who criticizes the Premier of being anti-Italian—anti-Italian wine, anti-Italian tomatoes, anti-Italian showgirls, anti-Italian whatever. To combat this, he has ordered a new anti-foreign press squad to bombard us with good news about Italy, which is to say about himself.

And this is a particularly interesting issue to me as a foreign journalist, but also as a writer, and so I spent some time yesterday searching details of rhetorical devices from ancient Rome to the present. My best answer is that this argument (love me, love my country, hate me, hate the tomatoes grown in Sicily) is a sophistic fallacy. I invite those better prepared to give us a more precise rhetorical term.



So how are Italians in the street reacting to this? I have in the past week touched base in Naples and Florence as well as Rome, and the most obvious effect is that the clash is embittering and divisive, and this may be the most serious and enduring fall-out. "It's a continuation of a kind of civil war," a journalist from Florence told me gravely. From an old-line feminist leader in Rome: "I'm so depressed about it all—everyone I know has no desire to do anything." From a young journalist in Naples: "I've just been hired by the right and hate them but I need the money." From an MD in Cortona: "We need Silvio—the others are merda." From a Tuscan family court judge: "All men need sex with women. What's the fuss about?" From a Roman housewife: "Who else is there—just look at the messy left." From Berlusconi's daughter Marina, 43, from his first marriage: "The aim is to overturn the verdict of the electorate." Her father, she said, is the victim of a "manhunt."

The word victim is significant, for it is hard to see that the most powerful and wealthy man in Italy is anyone's victim save, these days when he is making one gaffe after another, his own. Among the latest, besides issuing sinister threats against a judge, was to dump on Rosy Bindi, a progressive Catholic, whom he insulted by calling her "less intelligent than beautiful." Bindi being less than beautiful, and knowing it, she reacted sharply that she was not one of the women available to him. This launched an avalanche of signatures on an on-line petition in her support. As for this reporter, echoing JFK in Berlin, "Ich bin Rosy Bindi."

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