

Dissecting Berlusconi's Italy

Alice BONVICINI (September 26, 2010)



On September 20, journalist Marco Travaglio and Judge Piercamillo Davigo were invited to the School of Journalism of Columbia University to discuss the troubled present and past of Italy's democracy under Berlusconi's government. The debate was moderated by Alexander Stille, professor of International Journalism at Columbia and renowned expert on Italian politics

On Monday night, at the Lecture Hall of Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, it was hard to get a seat to attend the panel discussion "Free Press vs. Government Control: How Journalists Confront Political Corruption in Berlusconi's Italy." Marco Travaglio, investigative journalist, bestseller author, founder of the daily newspaper [Il Fatto Quotidiano](#) [2], and Judge Piercamillo Davigo, one of the lead prosecutors in the famous "Mani Pulite" (Clean Hands) investigation of the early nineties, spoke to an overflowing crowd of young Italian and American



attendees. The debate was moderated by [Alexander Stille](#) [3], professor of International Journalism at Columbia and renowned expert on Italian politics.

According to Mr. Travaglio, the reason why TV is a pernicious enemy of democracy is not so much in the greater visibility it grants to those who control it, but rather in the fact that those who control it can decide what kind of information is handed down and how it is presented, thus ultimately shaping public opinion. TV creates an ideal fence around reality: only what it brings to light exists, anything else doesn't. According to the Italian journalist this "simplification" has a dangerous consequence: the audience does not have the proper tools to form an opinion on all the little news they have access to. Travaglio further broadened his argument reminding the audience that the Italian Prime Minister Berlusconi not only owns a number of private television outlets, but he also exercises institutional influence on public channels. To put it in the words of journalist Claudio Gatti, also participating to the debate, it is like if Mr. Berlusconi controlled "CBS, NBC, ABC, PBS, Time Inc, the largest advertising agencies, Morgan Stanley, Random House and then the Yankees!" In a country such as Italy, where television is still the main source of information for 70% of the people, this unprecedented control of the media is definitely an issue we should care about, Mr. Travaglio emphasized.

Asked by Alexander Stille why "Mani Pulite", the investigation that brought about the demise of the First Italian Republic in the early nineties, did not result in the envisioned change in the ethical standards of Italy's public life, Judge Piercamillo Davigo replied that "time erodes indignation." He also remarked that in the last fifteen years, no matter what parties were in power, very little has been done to contrast corruption in Italy, while much has been achieved in limiting its prosecution. Among the other factors that contribute to the enduring presence of corruption in Italy, Judge Davigo also mentioned the enormous length of the trials, an archaic phenomenon typical of Italy.

Davigo also pointed at the unprecedented levels of penal deviance of the Italian ruling class: 10% of the members of the Italian Parliament has a criminal record. He then dwelled on the attacks that the Italian judiciary has endured in the last years, including accusations of being subversive and politically [left-wing] motivated moved by Silvio Berlusconi. Also, according to Davigo, the judicial reform advocated by the government would jeopardize the independence of the Italian judicial system - the "last bastion" on which Italy can rely to contain public abuses. For Davigo the Italian political class is unable and unwilling to assimilate the basic principle shared by the Western world, according to which those who have political power are not above the law.

Marco Travaglio took the microphone again and talked about his *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, a one-year old newspaper, very critical of the government, that has captured the attention of 120,000 people, notwithstanding the crisis that is hitting all newspapers in Italy. Ending on a positive note, he also mentioned the vehement reaction and unprecedented cohesion of Italian journalists against the [Legge Bavaglio](#) [4] (gagging bill), which among other things would prevent newspapers from publishing news concerning ongoing investigations.

The second part of the discussion saw the inclusion of Nadia Urbinati (Professor of Political Science, Columbia University), Claudio Gatti (*Sole 24 Ore*) and Beatrice Borromeo (*Il Fatto Quotidiano*) for a round table. Professor Urbinati exposed the weak opposition of the Italian left to Berlusconi, a phenomenon that Travaglio sees as caused by the desire of "legitimization." He also affirmed that the destructive "media-lynching" of which Berlusconi's opponents are victim functions as a deterrent to any effective antagonism. Finally, he argued that politicians, no matter what their ideological stance is, share a sense of collective belonging to the same *casta*, which helps defy any real opposition.

Gatti asked Travaglio and Davigo if in their opinion Berlusconi should be considered the real problem of Italy, or if he is just the final result of Italy's problems. In a country where a profit-driven coalescence between business and media, a very low conflict of interest threshold- even in the world of journalism, and a 40 years-long collusion between politics and the mafia have been common practice for years, Silvio Berlusconi, is not such an incomprehensible phenomenon. In the words of Davigo, when the country is trapped among lack of regulation of political parties, abundance of laws, social backwardness and ability of the mafia organizations to control votes, Berlusconi is a



quintessential result of this accidental terrain.

Carlo Gatti dwelled on the statement earlier made by Davigo that 10% of Italian politicians in office are convicted or indicted and affirmed that many “managed to get elected to avoid going to prison.” He brought the example of Marcello Dell’Utri, Berlusconi's right arm sentenced to seven years' imprisonment for relations with the mafia. In February 2010, he confessed to journalist and fellow panelist Beatrice Borromeo to have started his political career because of his criminal problems. In Italy, in fact, members of the Parliament are not pursuable during their political mandate

Interestingly the debate took place in the school of journalism founded by Joseph Pulitzer, who on the eve of its opening said: “Our Republic and its press will rise or fall together. An able, disinterested, public-spirited press, with trained intelligence to know the right and courage to do it, can preserve that public virtue without which popular government is a sham and a mockery. A cynical, mercenary, demagogic press will produce in time a people as base as itself.”

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