

MAMMA MIA! Why Do Italians Put Up with Berlusconi?

B. G. (November 08, 2011)



At Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò, Beppe Severgnini, the most sold Italian author abroad (columnist on *Corriere della Sera* and *The Financial Times*) Jacob Weisberg (*Slate Magazine*) and Stefano Albertini (Director of Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò) discussed the release of Severgnini's latest book "Mamma Mia!"

The timing might have not been more perfect for a book to come out. As we speak these might be the last days of Berlusconi's power and even if they are not, the decline is now tangible and his "era," his influence have definitely ended.

In this new light, *Mamma Mia* (Beppe Severgnini) - that started out as a contemporary satire - could become a point of reference for Italy's political "history."



Who is Berlusconi? It would be interesting as an experiment to go around the US and ask this question that would reveal a lot about what crosses over and what doesn't.

It's obvious that most articles by the "foreign press" – even with the best journalistic background or intentions – are bound to either just scrape the surface, fall into some misunderstanding trying to contextualize another culture, or in the best case scenario (like [the New York Times](#) [2]) have really ground-breaking details and reports but that might not have follow-ups for months.

That's why it's so hard to explain to the rest of the world, who Berlusconi is, why he's in power; it's almost impossible to translate the irony, nuances and opinions that go with the simple mention of his name in a modern Italian household. The confusion stems also from the fact that Italy is a first world country, with democracy, freedom, human rights, a high life-style and a lot of educated people but lately because of its leader it comes out (justifiably so in most cases) as a hedonistic dangerous place, where freedom is limited by a sex-driven dictator who has lost his mind in a series of extravagant parties. It's true that Berlusconi to an extent, does have control of what comes out or not in the press, that he has changed the legal system and certain laws to his advantage, that he can fire someone he doesn't like, without a solid opposition, and yet he's a "regular" guy, and Italy is not Libya or Iran: those people who get fired don't get banned, killed and they can always make a comeback or have their political space.

Therefore the truth, of course, is somewhere in the middle.

The hardest information to grasp from abroad are Berlusconi's actual political and financial crimes for the last twenty-thirty years: corruption, money-laundering, abuse of power, accuses for which in the US even a small-town mayor wouldn't have been able to be in charge. That's why the ongoing question in international circles is: "How do Italians put up with him?"

The answer might be that Italians like him more than what they want to believe as he has convinced most of them that "he's just like them." And Italians seem to have accepted it so far because who doesn't have conflicting interests? Who doesn't want to just close one eye in certain situations but fight for others? It's that blend of political relentlessness and Catholic forgiveness that somehow still pervades most Italians.

Beppe Severgnini, columnist of the prominent Italian newspaper [Corriere della Sera](#) [3] and of [The Financial Times](#) [4] examines the issue through a satirical and yet analytical lens of satire of what he described with a prompt joke a "tycoon turned into an escape artist."

At an event, organized by Stefano Albertini and [Sally Fischer PR](#) [5], at [Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò](#) [6] (NYU), along with Jacob Weisberg, Editor-in-Chief of [Slate Magazine](#) [7] and author of "The Bush tragedy," the book was discussed and examined in details, prompting laughter and reflection.

Severgnini came up with 10 reasons for Berlusconi's rise to power and political influence, all categories that tackle aspect of his personality or way of presenting himself (The Human Factor, the Divine Factor, the Robinson Factor, the Truman Factor, the Hoover Factor, the Zelig Factor, the Harem Factor, the Medici Factor, the T.I.N.A. Factor, and the Palio Factor). These factors are according to the author "some of the best and much of the worst of what Italians are" but they embody what Berlusconi represents and why he was popular with the masses and not the Leftist "elite." The Left, in fact, almost underestimated his "intelligence" of someone who knows how TV works and in Severgnini's words someone who's "Juan Peron mixed with Putin, Frank Sinatra and Danny de Vito."



There's the Berlusconi that stirs that soccer-like mentality of one faction against the other (The Oalio factor) where one prides himself on the opponent losing and not on the good pragmatic reasons for winning or making change; there's the Berlusconi that shifts appearance, personality and interests according to where he is (Zelig factor); the Berlusconi that works to his advantage the most ancient political system in Italy "the Signoria" (all other systems were imported), a code of conduct in which the signore and his servants, clients and although everyone complains there's always the hope that the signore would be kind just to us. Even if he's richer than the masses Severgnini's thesis is that Berlusconi's strength so far has been that "he's a follower, not a leader."

In some ways it's not far-fetched to say that he taps into a collective unconscious that begins with Berlusconi's desire to be loved which is at the core of all his actions: young women who live in small suburban towns, called up by the Prime Minister to Rome not necessarily only for sexual favors but just to sit and watch DVDs of him meeting the most important world leaders, to hear them say "You are so important."

Berlusconi shifts language according to his passions and the person he's talking to. He can have a "locker room," male-bonding type of language as well as the most formal and refined elocutions.

He comes from a trader's background, he knows how to sell stuff, how to get what he wants. People identify with his love of women, sports and easy living. Even if he didn't own the majority of media in Italy (newspapers, TV networks, etc.) - which he does - he would still be able to mold people's imagination through his personal story.

Although I find these categories perfect to explain the phenomenon, I don't know if I would completely agree with how Italians are "to the core" (maybe that's a bit of national pride), but I'm young...and that's a very important detail....

Towards the end of the lecture Severgnini talked about his 19 years old son.

He said that for his son Berlusconi is like "the walk-man of politics;" he's less and less of an example and these categories belong to a different generational mindset. I'm not saying this makes us automatically more idealistic, or better, but one can't ignore that is simply a different one. In the same way the Internet is different from TV.

We don't watch TV - not as much as in the past - we constantly gather contradicting information from Google or the wonderful social and political agora that Facebook can become. The effect that Berlusconi had on the masses 10 years ago, nowadays would be diminished by half. Young kids today (as much as people will always blame cultural icons or TV) actually have a very different attitude and these socio-political or human categories are very distant.

Our idea of the job market (even because of the crisis) is much more borderless and not Medicean, we get to see more things faster and therefore we have less awe for someone who has made it to the top in a "old school" kind of way. We admire high-tech geniuses who have always thought outside of the box. Ideologies and factions are becoming slogans shouted out in the 1960s and not filters through which we define every aspect of our life (and in Italy politics are so important that still there are people who hang out only with those who think like them or take decisions based on their political beliefs).

Kids get to see political debates held in the US and how different the campaigns are, how many more



rules and checks and balances are there to make sure nothing goes too overboard, they get to follow foreign presidents on a regular basis that make compromises without constantly slandering his adversaries. They get to create a software, edit a video in a few minutes and figure out first hand how powerful it can be on others.

Although the catholic mindset is still very much there, obviously we are moving further.

Instead of Berlusconi's vulgar jokes we are much more likely to note down this Steve Jobs' quote: Being the richest man in the cemetery doesn't matter to me. Going to bed at night saying we've done something wonderful, that's what matters to me.

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