

A Walk on the Margins of the G8

Judith Harris (July 09, 2009)



Who are the real protagonists of the G8 meeting?

ROME. So now we know the names of the real protagonists of the G8 meeting, underway at L'Aquila, the beautiful, ancient city so sorely tried by the death-dealing earthquake April 6, which killed almost three hundred people. No, it's not the world leaders discussing poverty and climate change, no no-global demonstrator, no party girl nor paparazzo.

The A-list begins with the residents of L'Aquila's tent towns, victims of the quakes, who lost their homes and, this week, have been more or less locked into their tents for reasons of G8 security. And indeed the L'Aquila mayor has repeatedly complained that the townpeople have been cut out of events, literally. Others have complained that, "like highway cafeterias where you have to go through endless corridors to find an exit," roads at L'Aquila that took three minutes to drive now take a half hour because of the imposition, for PR motives, of lengthy detours that require all comers to drive past reconstruction projects.

Other unseen protagonists: the firefighters, kept closer to (possible) action: one firefighter is assigned to each head of state as responsible for his evacuation in case of an emergency of any kind. Carla Bruni, who arrived in the Abruzzo today in company with George Clooney. Clooney upstages everybody.

Next comes President Obama's mother-in-law. This being a country where la suocera occupies a crucial role in society, commentators here, and especially women who happen to occupy that same role, were delighted that the President would bring her along. In Rome grannie took the girls to Giolitti's, a few steps away from Parliament, for ice cream cones. The owner invited the

girls into the kitchen to help make more ice cream. Delighted, they did. Needless to say, photographers were not far away, and the photos showed the elder Obama daughter, Malia, pretty in loose shorts and a T-shirt printed with a huge peace symbol.

Michelle Obama herself won kudos and endless written and radio reports for her arrival in a sleeveless yellow frock with a big green flower pin at one shoulder. Tomorrow afternoon at 4 pm the President and his wife will return to Rome for a private audience with Pope Benedict XVI.

Speaking of PR, you can already hear the sighs of relief coming from the organizers of the G8 because, so far so good, nothing untoward has taken place. Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi has had bad luck with previous G8 meetings: at the one held at Naples in 1994 he was served with notice that he was under investigation for corruption. In 2001 in Genoa riots left one demonstrator dead, and the city suffered severe damage. At this G8 venue rioters cannot get close to the damaged and suffering city, whose functioning access roads are easy to seal off. As a result, the no-globals were demonstrating mildly in Rome yesterday, where ten were arrested on more or less easy terms like "obstruction of justice," meaning not getting out of the way of the police fast enough.

Finally, the foreign press has been a major protagonist, seen by the Berlusconi camp as his enemy, incited by radical leftists at home to speak for them. And how they have spoken—and not only the Murdoch-owned Times of London. For weeks the foreign press world-wide has carried detailed reports of sleazy parties attended by young girls and more than one paid female "escort," hosted by the Prime Minister until the wee hours of the morning. While he and his PR people have downplayed all this on various grounds (right to privacy especially), the issue entered the public domain because of a devastating open letter from his now estranged wife.

There is no doubt that many foreign publications and broadcasters have treated Mr. Berlusconi harshly, even the Vatican has belatedly weighed in urging a return to morality. This week's French magazine [L'Express](#) [2] puts a grinning Berlusconi on its cover under the headline, "Enquête sur le bouffon de l'Europe, Berlusconi" (Investigation into the Buffoon of Europe). The British Times on Line shows a smiling Berlusconi holding a sign that says "G8", the 8 shaped by a girl's brassiere. In the US, CNN carried an interview with the confessed, very beautiful escort-for-hire, who has detailed her two nights with the Premier. And so on, and on, to Spain and even Asian publications.

For this reason at yesterday's G8 press conference following the meeting, reporters were not permitted to ask questions—any questions, not even on the issue of the day, climate change.

The real question behind the scenes has been whether these seismic events regarding Mr. Berlusconi's private life hamper his ability to deal with his peers at the G8. Indeed, one British newspaper picked up a report that in the G8 Italy might be dropped and replaced with Spain. Asked about this, one of his most senior colleagues and supporters in the Senate said, rightly, that this was technically impossible. (In any case, that would seem unlikely, for the G8 is being enlarged to include more countries.) However, he acknowledged, choosing his words carefully, any leader's prestige or



lack thereof influences the way his peers negotiate with him.

Because of Mr. Berlusconi's control over his own three national TV networks and two of the three state networks of RAI, one question being raised on the talk radio shows here is whether or not Italy has freedom of speech. It is true that political censorship of newspapers and news magazines does not exist, but only 20% of the public gets its news from written materials. The remaining 80% take what they can get from TV, and TV is to some extent visibly manipulated. The RAI TG1 blackout of reporting of the sleaze events at Mr. Berlusconi's homes in Rome and Sardinia has brought complaints from the oversight body of RAI; combined with the foreign press reports, it puts Mr. Berlusconi in the comfortable role of victim of foreign devils.

A careful tracking of RAI TV shows manipulation as well as omission. At Viareggio, last week, where a train running off the tracks carried a load of gas that exploded in a devastating fire, the Prime Minister arrived and was greeted with boos and catcalls. On TV, however, there was applause which sounded artificial. In fact, a news report the following day reported that it was artificial. Secondly, the Italian Prime Minister attended a recent meeting of European foreign ministers, even though his own foreign minister was there. On that evening's state-owned RAI TV news Channel 1 his presence was duly reported, illustrated by footage of a previous meeting, not with foreign ministers, but with heads of state (and hence more prestigious). The footage, in other words, had nothing to do with the event, and the actual foreign ministers meeting had been plainly used an excuse to show Mr. Berlusconi in a world leadership role.

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