

A Specter Haunting Italy

Stanislao G. Pugliese (December 07, 2013)



On the eve of what seems to be the end of the Berlusconi Era, historian Stanislao Pugliese, Distinguished Professor of Italian and Italian American Studies, looks at the past two decades of Italy's political history. He finds that, supposedly under siege by what he perceives to be a politically motivated judiciary looking into his corrupt business practices, Berlusconi resurrected the specter of communism -- but in reality his brand of unfettered consumerism has done more damage to the country's traditional way of life than that which would have supposedly been inflicted by communism.



The vote in the Italian Senate to strip Silvio Berlusconi signals the end of a bizarre political epoch but it should not obscure the fact that Berlusconi is the symptom of a deep-rooted pathology in Italian culture.

In a May 2003 interview with the Times' Frank Bruni, Berlusconi repeated his ominously warning, crafted during his entrance into politics in 1994, "Only I can save Italy from communism."

It was a refrain the Italians had heard before. Is it possible that an Italian politician could utter that line without knowing that fascist dictator Benito Mussolini had thundered the same from the balconies eight decades ago? By then (1922), the threat of a communist revolution in Italy had already dissipated. Similarly, today there is no threat to the Italian Republic from communists, and it is arguable that such a threat never really existed, even at the peak of the Italian Communist Party's popularity in the 1970s.

Supposedly under siege by what he perceives to be a politically motivated judiciary looking into his corrupt business practices, Berlusconi had resurrected the specter of communism, but in reality he is the embodiment of another ghost, that of fascism.

There can only be two possibilities regarding Berlusconi's public remarks that only he "can save Italy from communism": either he is deaf to the irony of his own rhetoric or his hearing is pitch-perfect and his comments are really a not-so-subtle reference to his own brand of "benign" fascism. Controlling most of the mass media in Italy (from private and public television stations to newspapers, radio, publishing houses, and magazines), Berlusconi assiduously acquired—with the help of influential but corrupt politicians like Socialist Bettino Craxi—a stranglehold on popular culture. He tried to stifle intellectual dissent by rewriting the nation's history books (since he considered them too lenient on the antifascist partisan movement) and prosecuting anyone who "insults the office of the prime minister."

At one point, Berlusconi's vice prime minister was the "postfascist" Gianfranco Fini, and Umberto Bossi another key member of his governing coalition. Bossi, in his own farcical and theatrical political theater, marched through the Veneto to Venice with his followers a few years back. Italians seem to have forgotten to be wary of politicians who "march" on their cities. One is reminded of Marx's observation, "History repeats itself: first as tragedy, second as farce."

In the process of "saving" Italy from communism, Berlusconi developed a Christ complex as well. In interviews, he has lamented that his responsibilities are so overwhelming that he no longer has the opportunity to enjoy the fruits of his labor (such as sailing on his yacht or visiting his many vacation homes). "Italians simply do not realize how much I've had to sacrifice to be prime minister," he laments, conveniently neglecting that most Italians do not have a villa on the Emerald Coast of Sardinia. In January 2007, in a perfectly brilliant synthesis of fascism and Christianity, in which Berlusconi morphed into a combined Duce and Christ, he "anointed" Fini his "heir apparent" in what amounted to a symbolic "investiture." And if the reference to his own Christlike essence were not clear enough, Berlusconi remarked that he would happily pass to others such as Fini "the bitter chalice" of political power.



It was not the first time that Berlusconi had (ab)used the fascist past. In an interview with the British journal *The Spectator*, Berlusconi claimed that “Mussolini never killed anyone” and that in the practice of confino, the Italian dictator merely sent his political enemies “on holiday” to such idyllic locales as the islands of Lipari and Ponza or quaint hill towns in the Italian south, conveniently forgetting the deaths of Antonio Gramsci in prison, Piero Gobetti in exile, and the double assassination of the Rosselli brothers, which became the basis for Alberto Moravia’s novel *The Conformist* and Bernardo Bertolucci’s film of the same name.

As anyone who travels frequently to Italy can attest, Berlusconi’s brand of unfettered consumerism has done more damage to the country’s traditional way of life than that which would have supposedly been inflicted by communism. But the sad truth of this two-decade long political farce is that it tapped into Italy’s long history of conformism, venality, clientalism and cynicism about political power and public service. If fascism was, as Piero Gobetti theorized, the “autobiography of a nation,” Berlusconiism is the media-facilitated “selfie” of the Bel Paese.

* Stanislao G. Pugliese is Distinguished Professor of Italian and Italian American Studies Hofstra University

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