Power and Communication

Power and Communication:

Media, Politics and Institutions in Times of Crisis

Edited by

Silvia Leonzi, Giovanni Ciofalo
and Antonio Di Stefano

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing

Power and Communication:
Media, Politics and Institutions in Times of Crisis

Edited by Silvia Leonzi, Giovanni Ciofalo and Antonio Di Stefano

This book first published 2015

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Introduction

Framing Reality:
Power and Counterpower in the Age of Mediatization

Giovanni Ciofalo, Antonio Di Stefano and Silvia Leonzi

The debate on the nature of the relationship between the notion of power and the role played by communication in current Western societies appears to be boundless. The media have dramatically increased the capacity to exercise their symbolic force over other fields of cultural production (Bourdieu, [1996] 1998; Champagne, 1990; Benson, 1999; Couldry, 2004). By accumulating power, be it material (since they are economic institutions) or symbolic (as bearers of credibility and legitimation), the media have been proven to be capable of partly structuring those intrinsic rules, values, and practices that organize, for example, the political system or the academic world from the inside. The very historical trajectory of the category of 'authority' allows us to emphasize the crucial function of the media in symbolically weakening the universality of those dimensions that, in the past, contributed to shaping social reality. Before mass media communication was pervasively widespread throughout people's everyday lives, political authority reproduced its own power by keeping citizens at a distance from its *défaillance* (cf. Sennett, 1980; Clegg, 2000). However, when television started to enter the field of politics, publicly staging the 'scandalous' (private) life of Prime Ministers or Presidents, things changed quickly and this type of authority, whose power was grounded in what is kept hidden and secret (cf. Simmel, [1908] 1950), began to be subjected to various forms of public contestation. In other words, the media, especially television, contributed to blurring the boundaries between stage and backstage, which are at work in a social reality where physical space can

signify practices, relations, and discourses (cf. Goffman, 1959; Meyrowitz, 1985). In this way, they have been able to bridge the gap (e.g. in terms of access to information) that divided politicians and citizens, turning an institutionalized distance into increasing levels of closeness. This phenomenon, approximately, started taking place more or less in the 1970s in Western countries, although in the United States the process had emerged at least a decade before. Many different and unexpected effects were produced in the field of politics by the growing power of the media, whose impact and development were strictly linked to other cultural and social processes that impacted upon many segments of society. Politicians were solicited to make their image more appealing to public opinion, by pursuing multiple strategies relying on emotional and affective narratives whose aim was to foster people's heightened engagement. Both Ronald Reagan in the United States and Silvio Berlusconi in Italy represented, at different levels, the manifest and effective embodiment of a form of spectacular politics, in which a charismatic leadership manages to supplant the traditional principles guiding politics as a system. In other words, the fact that an actor, on the one hand, and a successful media entrepreneur, on the other, were able to become political leaders is a clear indication of how the heteronomy of the media partly succeeded in redefining, from the outside, the priorities and aesthetics of politics especially in its relationship with citizens/voters.

However, this phenomenon is not to be understood as a unidirectional dynamics. In these cases, depending on the level of internal coherence that regulates the functioning of a political system, a process of creolization is likely to take place (cf. de Certeau, [1980] 1984), which is a mixture of combined codes and styles whose actualization reverberates through both politics and the media.

> The fact that politics is essentially played out in the media does not mean that other factors (for example, grassroots activism or fraud) are not significant in deciding the outcome of political contests. Neither does it imply that the media are the power-holders. They are not the Fourth Estate. They are much more important: they are the space of power-making (Castells, 2009: 194).

Visibility is a double-edged sword (Thompson, 2000, 2005; Brighenti, 2010). Media coverage allows politicians to direct people's attention away from an uncomfortable truth and to avoid those issues that may alienate some voters. At the same time, greater media exposure may increase the risk of being caught out in an error or caught up in some scandal. At the bottom, as the fictional character, Harvey Dent, says in *The Dark Knight*

movie (directed by Cristopher Nolan, 2008), "You either die a hero or you live long enough to see yourself become the villain". A politician's ability to address and discuss controversial topics related to his/her own cultural background (e.g. Barack Obama) or his/her own sexual affairs (e.g. Bill Clinton or again Silvio Berlusconi) profiles itself as a crucial and fundamental property to continue exercising a legitimated form of political credibility. However, citizens or a larger segment of them started remaining on the sidelines of democracy, also in light of an increasing number of scandals and mistakes in which these public figures were mostly involved. The public revealed greater levels of political skepticism, even though, in some cases, some citizens from Western societies have found alternative ways to express their dissent, for example, in those areas recognized as sub-political (Beck, [1993] 1996), such as critical consumption (Sassatelli, 2006).

Focusing on the media allows us to emphasize their capacity to exercise power over other forms of cultural production ('cultural' is employed here in a broader sense). However, they are not to be understood as autonomous entities. As Castells rightly observes,

> Power is more than communication, and communication is more than power. But power relies on the control of communication, as counterpower depends on breaking through such control. And mass communication, the communication that potentially reaches society at large, is shaped and managed by power relationships, rooted in the business of media and the politics of the state. Communication power is at the heart of the structure and dynamics of society (Castells, 2009: 3).

The media are intertwined environments subjected to the influence of other cultural, economic, and political forces, which, in turn, reveal themselves capable of framing reality through the media themselves. In keeping with the purposes of the book, we might mention the topic of 'economic crisis'. This issue has undergone constant attempts by different organizations (e.g. think tanks) comprising of particular experts, academics, and strategists (cf. Rich, 2004), to narratively 'articulate' the event. The media also contributed, indirectly and actively, by emphasizing the tragic consequences of the crisis in terms of unemployed-related suicides and more especially, giving voice and visibility to those worldviews that appeared to be dominant and more appealing. Identifying causes and guilt was the first step in a more general process aimed at providing new economic solutions and novel political strategies. Austerity measures adopted in some European countries to cope with economic crisis are precisely the result of ideological struggles, whose origin can be

traced back to the 1980s, a period in which a criticism of the state as an inertial and bureaucratic entity compared to the dynamic and innovative private sector, started to become a 'common sense' truth (Mazzucato, 2011). The complexity of the phenomenon does not allow us to fully address it in this introduction, however we argue that the media have probably played a fundamental role in contributing, in most cases, to turning an opinion into a fact, which is shared and accepted as such. In other words, the subject of 'economic crisis,' which is grounded in actual conditions of existence, has been described by television and newspaper accounts, and reconceptualized through conversations on the social media, where people's everyday life experiences and mediated representations of reality converge. But, since the concrete frames that experts, academics, economists, politics, and strategists manage to deploy and spread through public opinion, in order to make sense of a complex reality, are at the core of this process, an 'ideological position' on economic crisis can be legitimated as a just perspective.

At the same time, the increasing importance of social movements as forms of counterpower is clearly obvious. At least in principle, these are the expression of the instances of those subjectivities that are ignored or disregarded by traditional politics and economics (Melucci, 1996; Touraine, 1985; Castells, 1997). Since 2011, *Occupy* movements have started representing the most visible and effective attempt to place people and their communities at the core of increasingly complex phenomena. More generally, the idea behind these 'light' organizations was precisely the possibility that individuals, understood as citizens, could reappropriate their lives and future, subtracting the latter from the control of seemingly 'invisible' powers (Heath, Flectcher and Munoz, 2013, eds). In these cases, social media environments or corporate SNS (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube) have paradoxically contributed to make the *Occupy* message publicly available. They have actually allowed activists to coordinate their protest activities, to organize internal systems of communication (on the role played by mobile phones, see Castells, Fernández-Ardèvol, Qiu and Sey, 2006), and to offer an intertwined basis of information that profiled itself as a useful means of attracting the attention of mainstream media (Terranova and Donovan, 2013). While recognizing the cruciality of these entities in making certain hidden issues visible to the public eye and of partly exercising pressures on politics and affecting government actions, we argue that social and cultural movements may actually be the victims of their lightness itself. In fact, they rely on weak and informal ties that become stronger relations within groups that organize protest activities. But, in order to be 'politically' relevant voices and to resist on the street and on the Web, at some point, social

movements might turn themselves into 'orgnets,' that is 'organized networks' (Lovink and Rossiter, 2005), diffused throughout people's everyday social experiences, which spread, share, and embody contents and values related to specific cultural issues. In this way, weak and strong, light and heavy may be the combined properties of movements whose power is actually molecularized.

Therefore, in the age of mediatization (Couldry and Hepp, 2013), the relationship between the media and other forces capable of pervasively exercising their power appears to be, paradoxically, as strict as it is opaque. Social media and smart mobile technologies fully embed the media in daily lives of people. More generally, they may affect the modalities whereby other institutions and organizations reflect on themselves and develop their worldviews. At the same time, however, politics and economics, experts and strategists have all learned how to 'exploit' this potential for their own purposes. Detecting the opacity that characterizes this form of 'exploitation' is the first step in the acknowledgment of the phenomenon.

Power and counterpower, and at a specific level, media and politics, think tanks and social movements, representation and reality constitute the most important topics addressed in the book. In Silvia Leonzi's essay, *Satire in Italy in the Post-Political Era*, there is an attempt to underline how political satire and political power are intertwined phenomena. Analyzing an Italian case, she has described the circumstances under which political satire has been partly colonized and contaminated by the popularization of politics (Mazzoleni and Sfardini, 2009). In fact, before Silvio Berlusconi's success as a political figure who was able to foster constant processes of renewal of Italian politics through the introduction of unusual language, entrepreneurial values, new codes of behaviour and so on, into parliamentary life, political satire had managed to remain substantially autonomous in terms of aesthetics and contents. The author argues that, after Berlusconi's revolution, political satire has been partly obliged to follow the 'innovation,' or perhaps we should say the 'eccentricity' of Italian politicians. This analysis reveals, once again, the long-lasting, strong and perverse bond that still underlies the relationship between media and politics in Italy.

In Giovanni Ciofalo and Giada Fioravanti's chapter, *The Cultivation of Power: Origins of Today's Media Industries, Politics, and Culture*, the aim is to draw attention to the special relationship between communication and power in the "Italian case". To do this, they tell three different stories which lie within the narrative frame of cultivation. The first tells of private television, the second of the political transformation of one of its chief

architects, Silvio Berlusconi, while the last refers to the present-day situation. According to Ciofalo and Fioravanti, the Italians were certainly influenced by this set of values and images and by the increase in communication opportunities, as well as by the expansion of the threshold of visibility. Although this cannot really be defined as a genuine *cultivation* of power, it does appear to have had a great effect on the cognitive dimension and, in the long run, has produced forms of conditioning in the processes of reality construction. Along the way, one of the main architects or indeed, the person who was responsible for this fundamental period of change has also managed to become one of its leading interpreters. In other words, Berlusconi's practical actions gave power to television, while television's symbolic action gave Berlusconi power. This clearly oversimplified causal model, based on an inevitable retrospective process of abstraction, is also shown to be a formidable consensus machine, through which the traditional kind of power is simultaneously preserved and generated.

Antonio Di Stefano's essay, *The Affective Imaginary of Social Media: Capitalism, Storytelling and Cultural Intermediation,* reflects on the symbolic mechanisms that allowed the social media system to become an appealing, fascinating, and exciting world in the eyes of the public, despite its multiple contradictions in terms of the economization of online social practices, colonization of individual affects, or the corporations' relative control over private processes of social exchange. The author contends that excitement and desire are not enough to keep people glued to the social media reality without question. Indeed, the more this sort of 'cultural and social glue' sticks to people's lives, the more the 'affective imaginary' works by turning social media environments into tailored and habitable utopias or dystopias, depending on the circumstances.

In *Does Big Brother Exist? Communication, Power, Meanings, and Relations of Production*, Marialuisa Stazio describes the multiple visions of agency in digital environments. More specifically, on the one hand, she notes the risk that social media realities could resemble some sort of triumph of the new 'microphysics of power,' or the biopolitics of the bioeconomy, based on bringing "life and its mechanism into the realm of explicit calculation" and making "knowledge-power an agent of transformation of human life," as in Foucault definition of bio-power ([1980] 1991: 43). On the other hand, the author observes that we are still at the beginning of empirical research regarding agency in digital environments. Accordingly, as social scientists, we cope with the problematic conceptualization of this agency, which operates between *empowerment* and *exploitation*.

Erica Antonini's chapter, *New Trends in Power and Communication: Features and Cruxes of Italian 'Five Star Movement'*, offers a more in-depth description of the antinomies that characterize Beppe Grillo's movement. The Five Star Movement appears to rely on the democratic power of the internet and on its alleged capacity to allow the common man to take part to political decision-making processes. As a matter of fact, it is actually playing on the charisma of its leader but at the same time experiencing many difficulties in its institutionalization. Grillo chased the mirage of transparent direct democracy by means of the internet. However, the latter is becoming something of a crux, as on the one hand, a utopian image helps followers to mobilize but, on the other, when success is gained, the return to daily political contents, subjects and tones is still unavoidable. In this way, the Five Star Movement has experienced the fact that "movement is easier than government" (Wiles, 1969: 168).

In Marcos González Hernando's essay, *Shifting Climates of Opinion: The Strategies of British Think Tanks to Cope with, and Seize, the Economic Crisis of 2008*, the purpose guiding his work is to launch a discussion on the role played by think tanks – specifically in Great Britain – in narrating and interpreting moments of crisis, with particular focus on the 2007-2008 financial crash. He mainly concentrates on exploring think tanks' interventions and strategic positioning in relation to other actors, by describing their involvement in policy-making and politics more generally, their relationship with the media and their role as advocates and/or experts in defence of ideas. According to the author, think tanks are compelled to both push forward a particular set of explanations and policy prescriptions – often associated with an ideological inclination – whilst also attempting to give an authoritative account that has a minimal degree of epistemic authority based on expertise, which entails, at least to a degree, a claim of intellectual independence.

Karol Franczak's chapter, *Between Diagnosis and Prognosis*: *Media 'Instruction Manuals' on Economic Crisis*, focuses on the Polish media efforts to explain the crisis in the form of what can be called media 'instruction manuals' (guides, reference works, 'essentials'), whose actual function is to have a symbolic and engaging impact on the public discourse, or – in other words – to manipulate readers or viewers into adopting a certain point of view. Using research into the framing of the public sphere, the aim of the essay is to evaluate a specific publication that meets the criteria for an 'emergency instruction manual,' in order to reveal how the economic crisis has been conceptualized and defined. In this way, Franczak is able to articulate an in-depth analysis of the process of social

definition of the crisis (or rather crises) in the Polish media, and an investigation of the mechanisms of social perceptions of this category.

In *Crisis and the Information Economy: Re-Reading Herbert S. Schiller*, Mandy D. Tröger, first of all, gives a brief account of the emerging field of the political economy of communication and Herbert Schiller's central place within. The author, then, discusses central themes in Schiller's work relating to the 'information economy', such as the role of transnational capital, communication technology, consumerism and labor. Particular attention is given to Schiller's *Information and the Crisis Economy*, a work that focused on the shifting role of information as the key element to a newly developing political-economy defined by transnational capital. As such, it offers an illuminating account of the forces that drove the development of the communication infrastructure nowadays known as the internet.

References

Beck, U. ([1993] 1996) *The Reinvention of Politics,* Oxford: Polity Press.

Benson, R. (1999) "Field Theory in Comparative Context: A New Paradigm for Media Studies", *Theory and Society* 28(3): 463-498.

Bourdieu, P. ([1996] 1998) *On Television*, New York: New Press.

Brighenti, A.M. (2010) *Visibility in Social Theory and Social Research*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Castells, M. (1997) *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture.* Vol. II: *The Power of Identity,* Oxford: Blackwell.

—. (2009) *Communication Power,* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Castells, M., M. Fernández-Ardèvol, J.L. Qiu and A. Sey (2006) *Mobile Communication and Society: A Global Perspective*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Champagne, P. (1990) *Faire l'opinion. Le nouveau jeu politique,* Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit.

Clegg, S. (2000) *Power and authority: resistance and legitimacy*, pp. 77-92 in H. Goverde, P.G. Cerny, M. Haugaard et al. (eds), *Power in Contemporary Politics: Theories, Practices, Globalizations*, London: Sage.

Couldry, N. (2004) *Media meta-capital: Extending the Range of Bourdieu's Field Theory,* pp. 165-190 in D. Swartz and V.L. Zolberg (eds), *After Bourdieu. Influence, Critique, Elaboration*, Dordrecht-Boston-London: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

Couldry, N. and A. Hepp (2013) "Conceptualizing Mediatization: Contexts, Traditions, Arguments", *Communication Theory* 23: 191-202.

de Certeau, M. ([1980] 1984) *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Foucault, M. ([1980] 1991) *Question of Method*, in G. Burchell, C. Gordon and P. Miller (eds), *The Foucault Effect. Studies in Governmentality*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Goffman, E. (1959) *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, New York: Doubleday.

Heath, R.G., C.V. Fletcher and R. Munoz (2013, eds) *Understanding Occupy from Wall Street to Portland: Applied Studies in Communication Theory*, Lexington: Lexington Books.

Lovink, G. and N. Rossiter (2005) "Dawn of the Organised Networks", *The Fibreculture Journal* 5.

Mazzoleni, G. and A. Sfardini (2009) *Politica Pop. Da 'Porta a Porta' a 'L'Isola dei famosi'*, Bologna: il Mulino.

Mazzucato, M. (2011) *The Entrepreneurial State*, London: Demos.

Melucci, A. (1996) *Challenging Codes: Collective Action in the Information Age*, New York: Cambridge University Press.

Meyrowitz, J. (1985) *No Sense of Place*: *The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behaviour*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Rich, A. (2004) *Think Tanks, Public Policy, and the Politics of Expertise*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sassatelli, R. (2006) *Virtue, Responsibility and Consumer Choice: Framing Critical Consumerism*, pp. 219-250 in J. Brewer and F. Trentmann (eds), *Consuming Cultures, Global Perspectives: Historical Trajectories, Transnational Exchanges*, Oxford: Berg.

Sennett, R. (1980) *Authority*, New York: Knopf.

Simmel, G. ([1908] 1950) *The Secret Society*, pp. 345-376 in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, edited by Kurt Wolff, New York: Free Press.

Terranova, T. and J. Donovan (2013) *Occupy Social Networks: The Paradoxes of Using Corporate Social Media in Networked Movements,* pp. 296-310 in G. Lovink and M. Rasch (eds), *Social Media Monopolies and their Alternatives,* Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures.

Thompson, J.B. (2000) *Political Scandal*: *Power and Visibility in the Media Age*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

—. (2005) "The new visibility", *Theory, Culture and Society* 22(6): 31-51.

Touraine, A. (1985) "An Introduction to the Study of Social Movements",

Social Research 52(4): 749-787.

Wiles, P. (1969) *A Syndrome. Not a Doctrine: Some Elementary Theses on Populism*, pp. 163-179 in G. Ionescu and E. Gellner (eds), *Populism: Its Meaning and National Characteristics*, London: Macmillan.

CHAPTER ONE

SATIRE IN ITALY IN THE POST-POLITICAL ERA

SILVIA LEONZI
SAPIENZA UNIVERSITY OF ROME

Introduction

While the American and British political scene in the 1980s was
dominated by Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher and their strong
liberal influence on the economic sphere, Italian politics was in the throes
of strong structural changes that were capable of unexpectedly upsetting
established institutional equilibriums. One of the key figures in 'tipping
the balance' between the two leading parties was Bettino Craxi, the
Secretary of the Italian Socialist Party, who had gained popular consensus
in the late 1970s. Craxi was known for his tendency to make a show of his
political personality, and the 'Sigonella crisis' (Crainz, 2003)[1] had shown
him to be the stereotype of your 'strong and decisive man.' This scenario
appears to be symptomatic for a cultural and social system that was forced
to renew itself after the period of political, economic, and social crisis that
had characterized the so-called 'anni di piombo' [Years of Lead].[2] In fact,
at the end of a decade where ideological and social conflicts and the
affirmation of extra-parliamentary terrorist groups had been the order of
the day, many Italians seemed to favour private undertakings over active
participation in the public sphere (Ciofalo, 2011; Colombo, 2012).

---

[1] The 'Sigonella crisis' refers to the events that happened in Sigonella, in Sicily, in
October 1985. Following the political rift between Bettino Craxi, the Italian Prime
Minister, and Ronald Reagan, the President of the United States, even further
differences were to emerge over the handling of the Achille Lauro cruise ship
hijacking.
[2] In Italy, the term 'anni di piombo' [Years of Lead] refers to the historical period
that mainly coincides with the 1970s (from the late 1960s until the early 1980s),
which saw a resurgence of extra-parliamentary violence on the part of left and
rightwing terrorists.

In part, the assassination of Aldo Moro in 1978 by the Red Brigades represented the symbol and *the point of no return* in this process of detachment from what is public. The Prime Minister's body was subjected to unprecedented media coverage, from the Red Brigades' press releases with Moro's face in full view, to the live coverage of the discovery of his corpse inside the red Renault, symbolically parked halfway between Via delle Botteghe Oscure and Piazza del Gesù. Almost two decades before the advent of *Tangentopoli* [Bribesville], his murder marked the definitive end of what political observers were to call the 'First Republic' (Livolsi, 1993, ed.).[3]

An analysis of the national political scene of this period makes it clear how the Christian Democrats failed to interpret the needs of the people, who ever since the 1980s, had become more and more unwilling to take an active and assertive role in anything to do with politics, and more and more inclined to delegate the leadership of their country to charismatic figures. Many of those who contributed to bringing about any significant changes had only lived through the tail end of fascism or were even born after the Second World War, and they therefore represented a generational change that was crucial to the dynamics of renewal of the overall political framework. Furthermore, this was a time when, alongside the citizen's decreased participation in *res publica*, Italians were experiencing feelings of disaffection and alienation, not just towards the State in general – the eternal object of suspicion (Sylos Labini, 2001) –, but more specifically towards the party system and its distortions.

In this sense, this growing personalization process, which Craxi embodies so well, where the media image of a leader is fashioned in a very short time, is transformed within a decade (Berlusconi's success in the 1994 elections is seen as a 'historical' turning point) into an established strategy on which to base the electoral campaign and the communicative pact with the Italian people. However, it is also evident that changes within the institutional setting are favoured by trends that are external to parliamentary action, but just as important for their consequences on political activity. The demise and entrenchment in the private sector coincided with the revolution initiated by Silvio Berlusconi in the field of broadcasting. Private TV stations began to enjoy enormous success, and an aggressive editorial strategy (Forgacs, [1990] 2000), aimed at liberalizing

---

[3] In Italian history, the concept of the 'First Republic' refers to the republican period that began after the Second War II and ended between 1992, with the *Tangentopoli* [Bribesville] case, that is to say, the judicial inquiry into the system of party funding, and 1994. This was the period when Silvio Berlusconi became Prime Minister and inaugurated a new era in national politics.

the market and backed by a strong growth in advertising revenue, brought substantial changes to the national media landscape in the space of just a few years.

Canale 5's, Italia 1's and Rete 4's cool, ironic, irreverent, and modern style (whose television aesthetic was completely autonomous and emancipated from the traditional style of the Rai), along with a glittering and often brazen imaginary that evokes American myths and dreams, create the conditions for the emergence of an increasingly more complex and volatile consumer demand. This mediatised spectacularization of daily life not only radiates throughout the system of the culture industry, but soon proves that it can influence politics and political strategies. The fundamental links that have always existed between media and politics in the history of this nation now appear to be inextricably intertwined. Moreover, they are clearly evident in the never-to-be-resolved 'conflict of interest' that is epitomized by Silvio Berlusconi, the entrepreneur-politician, who not only owns the private TV stations but also has a key-role in the political life of the nation.

On the other hand, this transformation from *citizen* to *consumer*, whose main interest is personal well-being and fulfilment that mainly derives from the possession and use of tangible and intangible property, is not without consequences and encourages the emergence of completely new issues and perspectives. As the Italian public started to grow accustomed to an advertising and television aesthetic based primarily on seduction, they started to view the *political market* in a different way. As Statera [1987: 178] notes:

> we should therefore expect to see the return of political spectacle, with the propagation of suggestive messages, the adoption of unpredictable styles and direct symbolic characterizations, as well as elusive and engaging actions that are beyond the established line-ups. We may not like it, but this is probably the only feasible way that the Italian political system can be unblocked at the moment.

In this passage, the Italian scholar is extolling the renewal of communication styles and practices in embryo, and hence, he is not yet able to outline the negative consequences of a spectacularization that, in time, would manage to strip traditional politics of much of its meaning and content. More generally, the numerous important transformations that were taking place on the cultural plane have been neatly described by the French scholar Jean Francois Lyotard ([1979] 1984). He analyzes the transition from modern to post-modern society that was sanctioned by the end of the *Grand Narratives*, that is to say, those ideologies in which an

eschatological vision was proposed to every person, where the fate of the human race is matched with great stories that are common to all. The emergence of a multitude of micro-narratives, which some scholars see as a symptom of pluralization and, therefore, of the democratization of the public sphere (Vattimo, [1990] 1992), takes on unprecedented connotations in politics. We are witness to a

> discursive shift towards integration: the emergence of a media environment defined by the collapse of the previous distinctions between genders, social practices, and discursive fields. In such an environment, politics and popular culture, information and entertainment, the comic and the serious, the real and the surreal have merged, creating a new mixture of expressivity (Baym, 2007: 373).

Basically, the increasingly predominant role of a genre like satire has brought about the transition from the *representation/report* of the imagined future to the *narration/tales* of events and stories based on the present, where dogmatic assertion is replaced by irony and sarcasm.

As far as the objectives of the next paragraph are concerned, one of the obvious fundamental changes concerns the relationship between citizens and political authority (see Sennett, 1980). In fact, in a system where the dynamics of personalization assume the form of increasingly strong leadership and where media pervasiveness is on the rise, it is possible to see the negative consequences of an unprecedented visibility (Thompson, 1995) and the emerging criticism of a politics that is in the hands of a single charismatic figure.

For authority to exist and remain intact, there must be a formal distance between the leader and his public (a void which is offset by the *aura* of an almost divine body), while, in this context, there is an unexpected and sometimes alienating *proximity* between the two. And this is where satire comes into play, as the means of desacralizing this aura of leadership. The Leader's charisma not only becomes the subject of even the most *trivial* public conversation, but it is also something to laugh about all together, and its original form on the political institutional scene is defined and modified.

Political Satire in Italy from the 1980s onwards

The attempt to provide a historical overview of the phenomenon of political satire in Italy from the 1980s onwards shows that the previous, indeed rather unusual relationship between political leaders and citizens now underwent an interesting evolution. In other words, the politicians

themselves, whose role was being increasingly mediatized,[4] were on the search for ways to engage with their public that were based more around dialogue, at least in terms of visibility, than on forms of hierarchical and vertical communication, proven to be less effective. In fact, as Mazzoleni and Schulz (1999: 251) have pointed out, political actors have become "able to adapt their behavior to media requirements (…) they stage an event in order to get media attention, or if they fashion an event in order to fit the media's needs as regards timing, location, and the framing of the message and the performers in the limelight." Obviously, this situation was not unique to Italy, but also applied to most of the Western democracies, mainly in the period beginning in the 1990s. This was when political strategies were adopted that built up a seductive image of the leader and created an emotional connection with the voters and events that were increasingly mediatized (Campus, 2010: 220).

Although one cannot overlook the similarities with other Western leaders, it is also true that Italy has traditionally maintained several peculiar traits in terms of political media coverage and, more generally, as regards the relationship between media and politics, which are not found in other nations. For example, as Ciaglia noted (2013: 551), in 2009, a large number of Italian MPs were also enrolled in the Order of Journalists (12.4% of the House), and, in some cases, even continued to exercise their profession at the same time. On the contrary, in England and Germany, the figure amounted to 6.5% and 3.9% respectively (in 2010) and is a clear indication of how the relationship between media and politics in Italy has its own logic and dynamics, and how communication related professions are closely intertwined with political representation.

Two episodes from the 1980s can be considered typical examples of the construction of the Italian collective identity and the relationship between media, politics, and citizenship. Firstly, the President of the Republic Sandro Pertini's 'active' participation in Italy's 1982 World Cup victory, when he was filmed playing cards on the flight home with, among others, Enzo Bearzot. The second example saw the actor Roberto Benigni picking up Enrico Berlinguer, the Secretary General of the Italian Communist Party, in 1983 in Rome. Similar 'jovial' and unorthodox moments involving subjects who traditionally displayed a *gravitas* and respect for 'conventions' are proof of the transition that was underway and

---

[4] In particular, Strömbäck (2008: 234) conceptualized the process of political mediatization by resorting to a multi-dimensional approach. In fact, this scholar saw the main features of this phenomenon as being the affirmation of the mass media as a fundamental tool for information within the political framework and the establishment of a media logic that is partially independent of institutional power.

contribute to outlining new boundaries and modes of representation. The key figures on the political scene become part of a playful, popular, and informal imaginary, which is offered to the public in a de-institutionalized and commonplace form.

The presence of a comedian on a stage dedicated to political discourse, the very act of 'picking up' the leader, almost as if he were a child in need of protection, bring forth a potential for styles and languages, hitherto unexpressed. The public starts to get used to a different political grammar, while the private TV channels with their new content and styles provide the highest form of stimulation of all desires and the highest concentration of postmodern subject matter. Entertainment programmes such as Drive In, which focuses on speeding up languages in the age of fast food, and Striscia la Notizia, which rewrites the canons and content of journalism, are particularly interesting examples, since they were able to popularize and give new life to well-established genres and formats.

Satire, which in Italy until the 1970s had tended to be of a political nature and extremely harsh and corrosive in style, now provides the public with a tool where almost every aspect of daily life can become something to laugh about. Satire is also predominantly leftwing for a number of different reasons. Ever since the Second World War, the Communist Party had been a cultural and even a safe and desirable haven for avant-garde intelligentsia (Gundle, [1995] 2000). Party members had been forced into exile during the Fascist period and were a minority group in Parliament during the 'First Republic.' Therefore, power was mainly seen to be in the hands of the Christian Democrats, who were far more determined and interested in controlling culture, media and television in particular, and well able to exploit its potential as an *instrumentum regni*.

Of course, to claim that the satire of that time was leftwing may be going too far, but, in all likelihood, given the previously mentioned historical conditions, there is no doubt that leftwing satire has proven itself over time to be 'louder,' more mobilized, and better organized than that of the right. After all, the very fact of being the opposition, of being the minority group in Italy, and of experiencing limited job opportunities in the cultural industry actually incited several left-wing intellectuals to refine their political criticism and make it more appealing to an audience that in the 1960s and 1970s was in the throes of increasing its level of literacy (Forgacs, [1990] 2000). As Polese (2009: 9-10) observed, "satire is leftwing [...] it can be a strong political weapon [...] it needs a susceptible and short-tempered target and is, however, sustained by an absolute, extremely high level of self-esteem (Craxi, for example)."

The 1980s represent a critical moment in this process (Ciofalo, 2011). Although the ideologies and grand narratives, the refuge for both left and right, are already in the doldrums, they have not yet completed their life cycle. Satire, therefore, still has a political connotation and is deployed in one political field or another. Political leaders have started to use the new language of post-modern aesthetics but they have not completely internalized it yet, or better, they are still in pursuit of satire rather than second-guessing it.

The comedian Beppe Grillo's dismissal from the Rai, following his monologue on November 15, 1986 against the Socialists, led by the then Prime Minister, Bettino Craxi, shows how the relationship between satire and politics in Italy was characterized by both a clear antagonism and also subject to censorship. In particular, the figure of Craxi, as Polese (2009, ed.) rightly maintains, is the perfect target to be mocked and ridiculed, inasmuch as he represents a strong and somewhat authoritarian and decisive leader. Although he became the emblem of an unprecedented spectacle of political life, Craxi was, however, still a traditional politician, which gives an almost sacred value to the management of his image and as such, does not allow his person to be trivialized. In the 1990s, the antagonism of the previous period allows for an unprecedented contamination.

In 1992, *Tangentopoli* [Bribesville], i.e., the judicial inquiry into the illegal financing of political parties, marks the end of the 'First Republic.' In 1994, a Milanese businessman, Silvio Berlusconi, founded a new party, Forza Italia, in just a few months. This new party trounced the Communists in the elections and gave rise to a new political and cultural era. From this moment on, "mocking the laughing king becomes more and more difficult." Politics has now acquired the style and languages of entertainment and uses the comic register to its advantage, putting a strain on the traditional modes of using the satirical weapon. In other words, if in the past satire had outguessed politics and laid it bare, now it is politics, with its internalized styles and practices typical of the world of entertainment, that becomes the mouthpiece of a formal and linguistic change capable of revolutionizing the way of thinking and doing politics in Italy. As Polese (2009: 9-10) observes yet again:

> Silvio Berlusconi, a completely new character, ever the nice guy and always quick to crack a joke, who wears a bandana and uses shoe lifts to look taller, who likes to play malicious pranks and travels around with his face made up, giving the impression of not believing in the sacredness of the power he actually embodies.

Back in the 1970s, Berlusconi had already become someone to reckon with, first in the world of advertising and then television, and he was the key figure in introducing forms and styles into Italian politics that were highly unusual. He speaks in a conversational style (Morcellini, 1995), familiar to your average Italian or 'your housewife from Voghera,' who have no difficulty in identifying themselves in the slogans that often come from football jargon, or with pub jokes that make the leader 'one of us'.

The very name of the party, Forza Italia, exalts the idea of cheering one's team on. Such innovations simplify and speed up his acceptance by the Italian people, who till now have only known him as the President of AC Milan. Over time, Berlusconi 'refines' his techniques and communication strategies, despite numerous faux pas and controversies, which, however, had no particular effect or negative consequences in terms of political response. On the contrary, they actually served to make him more human and therefore closer to the common man.

It is emblematic that shortly after his election Berlusconi claims to be 'anointed by the Lord' or that he is a 'working class Premier,' a mixture of the sacred and profane, the *high* and the *low*, which creates closeness on the one hand, but arouses admiration on the other. The group photo taken at a meeting of EU foreign ministers in 2002 shows the Prime Minister making the 'sign of the horns'. In 2003, shortly before taking over the rotating presidency of the European Union, he told the German MEP Martin Schultz that he would have recommended him for the role of a Kapo in a film about concentration camps. These episodes are flanked by all the jokes he cracked during public events of an institutional nature, and the meeting with Tony Blair in 2004 when he wore a bandana.

This all goes to show how Berlusconi appears as a real trickster in the panorama of Italian politics. His innovations in communication, characterized by a continuous recourse to the language of comedy, have produced significant changes in the relationship between politicians and citizens. His coming to power certainly intensified the process of the strong personalization of political imaginary, where the leader's charisma soon filled the void of meaning that the traditional parties had always had. Therefore, on the communicative level, the 1990s can be said to represent the period of contamination. Satire is no longer simply the product of extra-party characters that make light of the most significant figures in power, but rather, it is the outcome of a hybridization that sees the emergence of political players, who are, at least to a certain extent, more willing to accept satire and even to put it to their own good use, thereby weakening its harmful effects.

In the noughties, this process of change is brought about in more defined and decided ways, so that this period can be considered as being characterized by the dynamics of *subversion*. The protagonists of satire acquire an awareness of the political role the public have attributed them, while, at the same time, political protagonists discover that satire is more a legitimate strategy than a disturbing tactic. As Mazzoleni and Sfardini (2009: 51) note, "the comic or stand-up comedian looks good on camera and calls the viewer as citizen into question. This is how a relationship of trust is built up between the star performer and his audience, endowing the value of truth to what is being communicated."

The Interpreters of Political Satire

Of course, there is only one Berlusconi on the Italian scenario, especially in terms of his unprecedented media power in the Western world, which meant that the Italian comedians, whose forte was in political satire and who came after him, were initially caught unprepared. But as time went by, several of them proved that they were able to 'exploit' the Prime Minister's shortcomings for their own repertoires. In particular, Berlusconi was effective in initiating a process that emptied the contents and language of traditional politics and, to a certain extent, reduced the effects of the public criticism that satire tends to produce. However, if one describes the communicative relationship between politicians and comedians from a relational perspective, the resulting complexity of the situation in this period is clear to see.

First of all, we need to distinguish between the different types of satire: the *court jester*, the *laughing hyena* and the *preacher*. Programmes such as Il Bagaglino, Chiambretti Night, Striscia la Notizia can be included as examples of the first type. They offer forms of satire that could be called 'controlled,' since they take place within the boundaries of themes and characters that are pre-established by the powers that be and tend to stay within a comfort zone of consolidated subjects and language. For example, although Il Bagaglino puts leading political figures on show, it is never really 'critical'. It becomes a sort of superficial satire that takes an almost complacent look at the shortcomings and faults of the characters who are being exposed to ridicule, with content that is never of the utmost political importance.

Instead, the *laughing hyena* category, whose protagonists are personalities like Serena Dandini, Corrado Guzzanti, Maurizio Crozza, Neri Marcorè, Zoro, etc., is a form of more direct satirical action, where the comedian puts him/herself completely in the shoes of the politician. However, the

chosen target's behaviour and language is not merely imitated, but – as on Il Bagaglino – taken to an extreme level that reveals the politician's 'true' nature to the public. We are therefore talking about a case of exaggerated satire, but this very fact of being 'over the top' is what allows a public, who are not so familiar with political spectacle, to grasp the leader's or the party's most salient feature in just a few lines or catchphrases.

The third type is represented by *the preacher* (Sabina Guzzanti, Adriano Celentano, Beppe Grillo, etc.) and has quite a few differences with the first two. In fact, *the preacher* does not need to step into the shoes of the 'other person' he/she wishes to satirize, but instead he/she sets himself up on a pedestal from which an extremely personalized form of satirical criticism is presented to the public. All of the aforementioned figures are prime examples of this, even if their performances sometimes have different features. Adriano Celentano is more prone to long monologues where he enters into a sort of mystical communion with his public. He speaks very slowly, giving his audience time to contemplate the meaning of his words that are never shouted but merely suggested. His style is completely different to that of Beppe Grillo who tends to put on shows where he makes great use of his physicality, accompanied by an explosive communicative verve and his 'yelled' speeches which enhance the effectiveness of the proposed contents.

Pop-ilarity or Political Satire in the Social Media Era

All these characters are immeasurably connected to the world of television, and their symbolic identity is conveyed through the visibility that only television can provide. This link was particularly strengthened from the 1980s onwards and has had inevitable consequences on the satirical models that are proposed, on the different narrative modes that are used, and on the very politics of satire. Inevitably, ever since the year two thousand, when web 2.0 sanctioned the creation of a horizontal connection between users and the technological infrastructure, that is to say, when the groundwork was laid for the subsequent success of the social media universe, political satire has also had to change its style and course of action (Castells, 2009).

The television model has always been based on a rather traditional, single performance space dominated by just one performer who transmits an educational, critical or sarcastic message, where satire is inscribed within a set of *unspoken rules* that must be obeyed. In this sense, television is like a closed world, and satire must not only fight with political power but also with the rules of conduct imposed by a shared

public space. Of course, the 1990s saw languages gain a certain autonomy compared to the three previous decades, but the process was still not complete. Instead, on the Net, that is to say, in a space that encourages the centralization of relational universes rather than the spread of uncontrolled navigation (the success of Google as a search engine and Facebook as a social network confirm this trend) satire no longer belongs to a performer or to a particular space, which is, therefore, controlled in all its forms. These elements are essential factors for understanding just how satire and its protagonists have changed their appearance in the social media era and how, with the passing of time, they have interiorized forms of development in which virality or *memes* play a central role.

Therefore, in light of all these processes, we wish to add another aspect to the categories that have already been analyzed (*the court jester, the laughing hyena, the preacher*). In our opinion, a further concept, namely *pop-ilarity,* is necessary to allow the description and definition of today's modern trends. *Hilarity* and *what is popular* form an original mixture which shows how the transmission of the feeling of hilarity, established and spread on the web and especially in social environments, may possibly result in many of the users getting emotionally involved in a form of a satirical narrative. To explain this better, let us take an in-depth look at the page called É tutta colpa di Pisapia [It's all Pisapia's fault]. This involved a particular kind of audience activism, launched by the centre-right in the person of Letizia Moratti, who used social media to demonize Giuliano Pisapia, the centre-left's candidate for Mayor of Milan in the 2011 local elections.

Our analysis was conducted on Twitter (#morattiquotes) and on the 'É tutta colpa di Pisapia' Facebook page. It is interesting to note that everything happened rather quickly and produced a sort of communication spiral. On 11 May 2011, Sky Italy aired the debate between Moratti and Pisapia, in view of the first round of the Milan administrative elections due to be held on May 15/16. At the end of the programme, the centre-right candidate reminded viewers how Giuliano Pisapia had once been suspected of carjacking, although she provided no proof to back her claim and said it just as the final credits were rolling, preventing her opponent from answering back. In actual fact, the episode proved to be a boomerang for Letizia Moratti. On Twitter, #morattiquotes reached a quota of 141 within a few hours, and Pisapia went from being a possible culprit, to someone to be defended, to whom the social media ideally returned the right to reply. In fact, in some tweets, his name paradoxically appears alongside some of the most terrible atrocities. The heavily ironic style that is used goes to highlight not only the fact that Moratti's accusation was

unfounded, but that it was practically unreal or, better still, surreal. Here are some examples:

> #Pisapia tampered with the Fukushima nuclear reactor
> #Pisapia steals petrol from the tanks of electric cars
> #Pisapia is the black smoke in Lost
> #Pisapia rented an apartment (under the table) to Bin Laden
> #Pisapia killed Chuck Norris
> #Pisapia disguised as a chambermaid framed Strauss-Kahn
> #If you listen to Pisapia's voice backwards, you'll hear the voice of the devil
> #Pisapia disguised himself as a serpent and deceived Eve
> #Pisapia puts on his diving gear and uses a hand drill to hole immigrants' boats

On 14 May, the blog of the leading national newspaper Il Fatto Quotidiano explicitly cited the Twitter episode and described its success as being a big hit. Repubblica.it also reported the event on May 20, while the day before, the Facebook group 'É tutta colpa di Pisapia' had been set up in connection with the same situation and following the allegations launched against the centre-left candidate by Red Ronnie. The latter was a TV music show host who had accused Pisapia of having cancelled a musical event in Milan (even though he had not yet been elected). The episode sparked off a new explosion of posts on Twitter, after the initial boom recorded in the first few days. However, the rebound effect does not end here. In fact, in his opening monologue on the noted Ballarò political talk show broadcast on RaiTre on May 24, the comedian Maurizio Crozza openly cites the phenomenon of 'É tutta colpa di Pisapia.' 4 days later, the cultural programme Chetempochefa, once again on RaiTre, saw the journalist Massimo Gramellini include the Pisapia affair in his ranking of the week's events. The #morattiquotes on Twitter carried on right until June 15, that is to say, a mere fortnight before the elections. A specific analysis of the rebound effect makes it therefore possible to say that satire is presented as a transmedia content, able to cross the media boundaries that separate the different media and spread itself throughout the system, according to specific languages and styles. However, as we have seen, it does seem to be confined to certain media contexts and consolidated formats in mainstream media. To be precise, the 'É tutta colpa di Pisapia' case is mentioned on two traditionally leftist programmes on RaiTre, and therefore more critical towards the centre-right, and in two newspapers, La Repubblica and il Fatto Quotidiano, which are also more biased to the left. At this point the following words of two American scholars come in handy, Baum and Jamison (2006: 947), when they argue that "some American voters may need The New York Times to choose which