The Italian Anomaly
Berlusconi and Semiocapitalism

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A study of contemporary Italian society reveals social and political trends that are still developing elsewhere in the world, according to Franco Berardi (philosopher) and Marco Jacquemet (communications specialist). The success of Silvio Berlusconi can be explained by forces that arose during the Counter Reformation and the baroque and never actually left industrialized, Catholic Italy. Since the transition to the semiocapitalistic system, in which the linguistic element is dominant, they even have become obvious again.

The Italian Anomaly

In his book *Vuelta de siglo*, Bolivar Echeverria argues that the emergence in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries of the modern era is better understood if we don't conflate all historical changes into one single model, but differentiate between two conflicting and interweaving paradigms. [1] The first paradigm was developed by the dominant bourgeois vision of modernity based on the Protestant ethic and the territorial centrality of industrial production. The other vision of modernity emerged from the Counter Reformation and the baroque. This second modernity, he argues, became subordinate and marginalized when industrialization reduced the social field to a process of mechanic production and reproduction, elevating the former paradigm to become the sole depositor of modern subjectivity.

The nineteenth-century bourgeoisie was strongly rooted in a local territory because the accumulation of value could not be separated from the build-up (and expansion) of material production derived from the conflictive cooperation of workers' manual skills and capitalists' entrepreneurial and financial skills. Echeverria remarks that since the sixteenth century the Catholic Church has created a different strain of modernity, based on imagination and deterritorialization. The spiritual and immaterial power of Rome has always been based on the ideological control of the imagination, but this influence was hardly considered by the pragmatic ethics of industrial culture.

Catholic Spain of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was the harbinger of a non-industrial brand of accumulation, based on a massive robbery of the Americas. This strain of modernity was marginalized after the military defeat of the 'Invincible Armada' in the naval war with the British Empire, which led to the economic and political decline of Spain. The affirmation of Northern European capitalism opened the way to the Industrial Revolution and to the industrial production of material goods. Protestant modernity defined the canon, but the baroque strain of modernity was not erased: it went underground, tunnelling deep into the recesses of the modern imaginary only to resurface at the end of the twentieth century, when the capitalist system underwent a dramatic paradigm shift towards postindustrial production.

This new production sphere, which we have called *semiocapitalism*, is centred on the

creation and commodification of technolinguistic devices (from financial products to software to backroom service communication) that have by their very nature a semiotic and deterritorialized character. [2] With the emergence of a semiocapitalist economy, economic production becomes tightly interwoven with language. [3] While the territorialized bourgeois economy was based on the iconoclastic severity of iron and steel, postindustrial production is based instead on the kaleidoscopic, deterritorialized machine of semiotic production. This is why we can speak of semiocapitalism: because the commodities that are circulating in the economic world are signs, figures, images, projections and expectations. Language is no longer just a tool for representing economic process, it becomes the main source of accumulation, constantly deterritorializing the field of exchange. Speculation and spectacle intermingle, because of the intrinsic inflationary (metaphoric) nature of language. The linguistic web of semioproduction is a game of mirrors that inevitably leads to crises of over-production, bubbles and bursts.

We need to understand the social implications of the two different strains of modernity: the relationship between the industrial bourgeoisie and the working class has been a relationship based on conflict but also on alliance and mutual cooperation. The dynamics of progress and growth stemming from the physical space of the factory forced an agreement between the two fundamental classes of industrial times, industrial workers and industrial bourgeoisie. This agreement was based on collective negotiation, and led to the creation of the welfare state. The bourgeoisie and working class could not dissociate their destiny, despite the radical conflict opposing salary and profit, living time and time of valorisation.

A new alliance seemed possible between labour and capital in the last decade of the twentieth century. The experience of dotcom enterprises was the expression of this alliance, allowing for the extraordinary technological progress of the digital sphere. But this alliance was broken when financial power prevailed over cognitive labour. The predatory behaviour of the financial class has filled the empty space of aleatory value. When language becomes the general field of production, when the mathematical relation of labour-time and value is broken, when deregulation destroys all liabilities, predatory behaviour becomes the norm in the field of competition. This is what has happened since neoliberal politics has occupied the scene of the world.

Deregulation, the first principle of the Chigaco School, destroyed the political and legal limits to capitalist expansion. But deregulation cannot be understood as a purely political change. It has to be seen in the context of the technological and cultural evolution that has displaced the process of valorisation from the field of mechanical industry to the field of semiotic production. The relation between labour time and valorisation has become uncertain, undeterminable. Cognitive labour is hardly reducible to the measure of time. It is impossible to determine how much social time is necessary for the production of an idea. When the relation between labour and value becomes indeterminable, the power in the global labour market is the pure law of violence, of abuse. No more simple exploitation, but slavery, pure violence against the naked life of the workers of the world. Violence has become the prevailing economic force in the neoliberal age. [4] Violence of the Italian, Mexican, Russian organizations that command the market of narcotics, weapons and prostitution, and invest in the financial market. Call it mafia or whatever, the fact is that in Mexico, as in Italy, as in Russia, financial markets, mediascapes and political power are in the hands of people who gained power from lawlessness and violence. And this is not to mention the role of corporations like Haliburton or Blackwater in the USA: fuelling wars and destroying lives, jeopardizing countries because this is their business, a business that needs war.

Deterritorialization and Reterritorialization

Starting in the 1970s, the shift to immaterial production in the global economy eroded the bourgeois identification of wealth with physical property and territorialized labour. Contemporary capitalism is governed by laws that do not resemble those of the glorious era of industrial work, and by relationships that do not resemble the discipline and work ethic of territorialized production that dominated the world of classical industrial capitalism. This was the Protestant capitalism defined by Michel Albert as 'Rhenish' because its ideal geographical space was the Rhur area, the industrial area of Germany near the French border. [5]

Recent decades have witnessed a profound transformation, beginning with the disconnection of the financial networks from the material economy. The foundational moment of this process was the arbitrary decision made by US President Richard Nixon to abandon the Bretton Woods system established in 1944. In 1971, Nixon decided to abandon the gold standard, thus creating the self-referentiality of the US dollar. From that moment on, money fully became what it already was in essence: a sheer act of language. Money is no longer a referential sign that refers back to a lode of commodities, a quantity of golden metal, or any other given good; rather it is a factor of simulation, an agent capable of setting in action processes both arbitrary and independent from the material economy.

The semiocapitalist economy is a system of full indeterminacy: the financial turn of the economy and the dematerialization of production have led to a degree of market unpredictability and uncertainty unknown in the history of industrial economy. In the industrial production process, the determination of the value of a commodity can be based on a reliable element: the amount of work socially necessary to produce that commodity. But this is no longer true in the sphere of semiocapital, where the main factors in the production of goods are cognitive labour, language and imagination. Under this new model, the criterion of valorisation is no longer objective, and no longer quantifiable on the basis of a fixed referent. Labour time no longer serves as an absolute touchstone. Lies, violence and corruption are no longer marginal excrescences of economic life, but tend to become the alpha and omega of everyday business management. Economic power belongs to those who possess the most powerful technolinguistic dispositifs. Government of the mediascape, dominance of software production and control over financial information: these are the contemporary sources of economic power.

The semiocapitalist mode of production has engendered the formation of a new class of social actors, who are dominating the global economy, the *lumpenbourgeoisie.* [6] This class can be defined in opposition to the old bourgeoisie and its values of thrift, attachment to property and industriousness. The *affectio societatis* of the old entrepreneur has disappeared, as the new capitalists do not build their fortunes on local enterprises, but on ephemeral financial investments that have no relationship to a specific territory.

As often happens, the powerful process of deterritorialization that underlies the formation of semiocapitalism instigates a cultural effect of reterritorialization: a nostalgia for the old age of ethnically homogeneous communities, identitarian aggressiveness and Catholic fundamentalism. In contemporary Italy these dialectics have been embodied by the experience of the Lega Nord, a political formation that is part of the Berlusconi government and is deeply rooted in the industrial northern regions of the country. The Lega Nord is the main expression of the culture of reterritorialization, and it is also the political representation of the dynamic entrepreneurship that is producing most of the national wealth, and has based its remarkable electoral success (between 20 and 30 per cent in the northern regions) upon the rhetoric of territorial rootedness and the populist claim that migrant workers are responsible for the economic impoverishment of the working classes. But the display of affection to local culture and interest should largely be seen as mythology. Those entrepreneurs who blame globalization because it is destroying

the local community have grown rich investing their capital in Romania, and are exploiting the competition between migrants and local workers as a way to lower the average salary.

The dynamics of neoliberalism have marginalized the traditional bourgeoisie, replacing it with two distinct and opposing classes: the cognitariat, that is, the precarious and fragmented labour of intelligence, and the managerial class, whose only competence is its competitiveness. Taken to its extreme, as evident in increasingly larger regions of global capitalist production, competition becomes the armed removal of competitors, the armed imposition of one supplier, and the systematic devastation of everything that does not submit to the profit of the strongest.

The neoliberal phase of capitalism appears to be an interminable and uninterrupted process of deregulation, but in fact it leads to the exact opposite. As the regulations that set limits to the invasiveness of the principles of competition are removed, hard and fast automatisms are introduced in material relations between people, who become more enslaved as the enterprise becomes freer. The process of *deregulation* unremittingly removes the rules that bridle the mobility of productivity and hinder the expansive power of capital. One by one the advances of capitalist deregulation eradicate the cultural and juridical conventions of modernity and bourgeois law. This is why capitalism has turned into a predatory system: *Splattercapitalism,* the end of bourgeois hegemony and of the enlightened universality of the law. [7]

Anomaly

In order to better understand the Italian anomaly one should go back to the Catholic Counter Reformation that reinstated the primacy of the religious over the secular realm: the deep substratum of Catholic culture resists productivity and bourgeois efficiency. The Counter Reformation remained deeply engrained in the Italian social imagination throughout modernity and manifested itself in all its reactionary force at decisive moments in the life of the country. During the Neapolitan Revolution of 1799, the enlightened bourgeoisie was isolated and defeated thanks to the complicity of the people with the power of the Bourbon House, the ally of the church. From the 1800s onwards, the alliance of the church with the rural classes acted as an antibourgeois conservative force opposing attempts at laicization of national life. In the years that followed the Second World War, the Christian Democrats were the dominant political force, representing the mediation in a permanent equilibrium between capitalist modernization and religious backwardness.

However, it would be wrong to see the laxness that derives from the spirit of the Counter Reformation as a purely regressive and conservative energy. In the 1970s the 'Italian anomaly' was the expression used to underline the peculiarity of a country where social movements went on after '68 and marked the social scene for over a decade. In the 1970s the workers' resistance produced structures of mass organization and fuelled revolts against capitalist modernization. The Italian anomaly was based on the persistence of workers' autonomy and social conflict. Italy underwent a long cycle of proletarian struggles that embraced anti-modernism in a dynamic and paradoxically progressive way.

In that long wave of social conflicts we find a constant and recurring element: the refusal of the subordination of life to work. This refusal was manifest in a manifold of different ways: first of all as Mediterranean idleness, the privileging of sensuality and social life over productivity and the economy. In the 1970s this refusal flourished as a political act of insubordination and resistance against capitalist exploitation. So this concept could be inserted in the framework of progressive political strategy. Workers refused the effort and repetitiveness of mechanical labour, thus forcing companies to keep restructuring. Workers' resistance was an element of human progress and freedom, as well as an accelerator of technological and organization development. Contrary to the Protestant idea of progress as founded on work discipline, the autonomous anti-work spirit that

claims that progress, namely technological progress, is based on the refusal of discipline. Progress consists of the application of intelligence to the reduction of effort and dependency, and the expansion of a sphere of idleness and individual freedom.

The refusal of capitalist exploitation was not peculiar to Italy, of course. All around the world workers demanded wage increases and more free time for their lives. However, in Italy this insubordination transformed the anarchic spirit of southern plebs into an explicit and politically relevant issue: autonomy of everyday life from capitalist discipline. Did young rebel workers who in the 1970s came from Naples and from Calabria to the northern factories embody the individualist and anti-modernist populism that characterized the 1799 counterrevolution, and led Neapolitan people to oppose the enlightened bourgeoisie? Yes, in part. But they expressed also the realization that the society of industrial labour was nearing its end, and the consciousness that industrial labour was a remnant of the past, and that new technologies and social knowledge were opening up the possibility of the liberation of society from the burden of physical labour.

The idea that modernization and corruption are not in contradiction is deeply entrenched in the Italian cultural landscape. In the 1980s, in the midst of the international affirmation of neoliberalism, Italy gave life to a curious experiment in political economy. After defeating the workers' movements, in the Craxi's years the dominant baroque ethics tolerated embezzlements, corruption and mafia as a complement of economic development. The Italian politician Bettino Craxi and his Socialist Party (PSI), who entered the political scene of the 1980s, were representative of a convergence of the spirit of Counter Reformation with a cultural openness towards neoliberal modernization: modernization and corruption came to be seen as complementary. The Communist Party rebelled against Craxi not because he was opening the way to neoliberal politics, but because he was tolerating corruption. Actually Craxi, who opened the way to Silvio Berlusconi, his personal friend, had sensed what was to come with the affirmation of the neoliberal agenda. As neoliberalism made the old regulations of the welfare state redundant, every protection built by society against capitalist aggression was doomed to collapse. Italian 'cathocommunism', in its agony, desperately clung to the ethical question: instead of opposing neoliberalism, which destroys the welfare state, reduces wages and imposes a culture of competitiveness, the late communists opposed corruption, immorality and illegality. Paradoxically they defended the Protestant ethics that was being dissolved in the culture of the new capitalist class of predators.

Aleatory Rules

Simulation and fractalization are essential baroque categories. In *Neo-Baroque*, Omar Calabrese claims that the postmodern style recuperated aesthetic and discursive models that first emerged in the 1600s. [8] In the shift to postmodernity, the rationalist balance of industrial architecture gave way to the proliferation of points of view. Baroque *was* essentially a proliferation of points of view. While the Protestant rigor produced an aesthetic of essential and austere images, baroque declared the divine production of forms to be irreducible to human laws, be they of the state, politics, accounting or architecture.

Berlusconi's success can be partially explained by this ever-present undercurrent in Italian culture. He understood perfectly that politics cannot be reduced to following rules, because in politics there are no rules. Part of the secret of Berlusconi's success in politics lies precisely in the use of excess. The excessiveness of the declarations and actions of his government was a deciding factor for its electoral successes. Events that exceeded the framework of predictability, tolerability and codified political behaviour acted as catalysts for consternation and indignation while creating a safe passage for government legislation, dilapidation of collective property, abolition of workers' rights, and imposition

of discriminatory and racist laws. This technique of excess is now well tested: you have to talk big, very big, in order to then enact what is essential for the accumulation of power and the privatization of social spaces. A minister would take on the role of the unmanageable provocateur and would propose to bomb the ships carrying migrants to Italian shores. He generates scandal, but also an entertaining distraction. Soon enough another minister, more moderate and realistic, demands military control of the borders; which is followed immediately by a zealous functionary who carries out the forced deportation of Ethiopian and Sudanese asylum seekers by intercepting them in international waters and sending them back, without giving them the chance to file their asylum claims.

Berlusconi's language appears to be best suited for ridiculing rather than denying or restating the truth. His intention is to unveil the hypocrisy of political rules. For Berlusconi, the meaning of words can always be reframed, so much so that he is used to denying his own public statements the day after making them. In his actual role of prime minister, Berlusconi has often pretended to give his approval to the words of the President of the Republic, Giorgio Napolitano, even though these words blatantly contravened his own actions or the legislative activities of his government. The political word is devalued, ridiculed, captured in a semantic labyrinth where it can mean the opposite of its meaning found in dictionaries. Taking offence at his informality, vulgarity and his shallow lies is not an effective reaction; on the contrary it strengthens Berlusconi and his regime because the electorate understands him better than his political antagonists, and they sympathize with him.

According to common sense, political language has always concealed reality and provided hypocritical cover-ups to the arbitrariness and arrogance of the rich and powerful. Berlusconi paradoxically reveals this hypocrisy. He represents the rich and powerful, showing that the law is capable of nothing; he represents the rich and powerful as he laughs at the hypocrisy of those who pretend that everyone is equal before the law. We all know that everyone is not equal before the law; we know from experience that the wealthy and powerful can afford expensive lawyers, impose their interests, and conquer spaces of power inaccessible to the majority of the population. But this is usually hidden behind the smoke screens of legalism and juridical formalism. Berlusconi clearly states: 'I do what I want, and laugh at the legalists who want to oppose their formalities to my will. Let me do my work!' Now that the power of making and unmaking the law lies in his hands, he uses it to show everyone the impotence of the law. Like Humpty Dumpty, Berlusconi knows that what matters is not what words mean, but who owns them. Meaning is decided by the master of words, not by semantic tribunals. The interpretation of law is decided by its master, not by courts of law.

Berlusconi is transforming Italian institutions step by step, slowly, one linguistic reframing at a time. A good majority of Italians share his ideas without realizing that he is slowly eroding their civil liberties. In order to take away civil liberties, an authoritarian regime usually needs a coup and the violent establishment of a dictatorship. People may be unable to oppose the regime, but they are aware of what happened and can start resisting it. With Berlusconi the semantic definition of a coup has been reframed: instead of transforming state structures through one decisive, violent, and absolute action, he is relying on a myriad of small, undetectable modifications of state institutions (yesterday the public media, today the judiciary, tomorrow regional power). When these institutions are transformed one by one in a slow, almost homeopathic fashion, it is hard to see these changes as indexes of a dictatorship and mobilize a democratic opposition. But Berlusconi's media populism does not need an antiquated and blunt tool such as dictatorial power. When a media mogul turned politician can modify state institutions according to his will and interests by simply exerting his absolute control over technolinguistic machines (from media networks to gossip magazines, from advertising

agencies to poll-taking agencies) he doesn't need to set up a dictatorship.

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Footnotes

1. Bolivar Echeverria, *Vuelta de siglo* (Mexico DF: Biblioteca Era, 2006).
2. See: Franco Berardi, Marco Jacquemet and Gianfranco Vitali: *Ethereal Shadows*, *Communications and Power in Italy* (New York: Autonomedia, 2009); Franco Berardi, *Precarious Rhapsody: Semiocapitalism and the Pathologies of the Post-alpha Generation* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2010).
3. See Christian Marazzi, *Capital and Language: From the New Economy to the War Economy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008); Paolo Virno, *Multitude: Between Innovation and Negation* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2008).
4. In his book *Gomorra*, Roberto Saviano identifies the mafia system of southern Italy essentially as a form of postbourgeois capitalism where murderers are not just a malignant outgrowth on a healthy body, but the body itself. 'The word "Camorra" doesn't exist; it's a cop word, used by magistrates and journalists. It makes the affiliates smile, it's an experts' term, relegated to history. The word in use to describe clan members is System … Organized criminality directly coincides with the economy, the dialectics of commerce is the bone structure of the clan.' Roberto Saviano: *Gomorra* (Milan: Mondadori, 2006), 48.
5. Michel Albert, *Capitalisme contre Capitalisme* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1991).
6. Marx speaks of the lumpenproletariat in order to describe the lowest stratum of the industrial working class, including also tramps and criminals. The lumpenproletariat corrupts proletarian values, and is unable to accept any kind of political organization. The *nouveaux riche* who are emerging in the present age of the global financial economy may be identified as lumpen because they do not share the moral and political values of the old industrial bourgeoisie, and their wealth is not from the patient accumulation of labour and property, but by sudden enrichment and financial hazard and also often from criminality.
7. 'Splatter' is a horror film subgenre that deliberately focuses on graphic portrayals of gore and violence. Splatter tends to display an overt interest in the vulnerability of the human body and the theatricality of its mutilation. I call splatter the interconnection of economy and spectacular crime, which is a special feature of mafia and camorra. In this context, splatter refers to the corruption of social sensibility when crime, no longer a marginal function of the capitalist system, becomes a decisive factor for deregulated competition. As in a Quentin Tarantino movie, torture, homicide, child exploitation, the drive to prostitution and the production of instruments of mass destruction have become irreplaceable techniques of economic competition.
8. Omar Calabrese, *L'età neobarocca* (Bari: Laterza, 1989).

Tags

Capitalism, Democracy, Media Society