

The Dangers of Anti-Trumpism - The Italian experience on how not to resist an authoritarian demagogue

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Silvio Berlusconi's tenure as Italian prime minister shows how not to resist an authoritarian demagogue.

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Comparisons between Donald Trump and former Italian prime minister Silvio Berlusconi abounded throughout the presidential election campaign and have only proliferated since Trump declared victory. They are not entirely ungrounded.

Trump and Berlusconi are both men who came to power from business rather than politics, and both have presented their inexperience with the political establishment as a mark of purity. They have both insisted on their entrepreneurial success as the most evident proof of their qualification to rule the country. Like Plato's tyrant, they both exhibit an ethos based on a dream of continuous and unlimited jouissance and an aggressive and hubristic eros (though Berlusconi prefers to think of himself as an irresistible seducer rather than a rapist).

They both indulge in gross misogynistic and racist jokes and have reshaped public language by legitimizing insult and political incorrectness as acceptable forms of political communication and by embodying an exhilarating return of the repressed. They both revel in kitschy aesthetics and don the orange hue of artificial tanning. And they both allied with the far right in order to advance a political project of authoritarian neoliberalism and unbridled capitalism.

The analogies stop here. Trump's very resistible rise to power is, to a certain extent, more astonishing than Berlusconi's more predictable first electoral victory. While Trump hijacked the Republican Party, running up against opposition from a large part of the Republican establishment and from the media, Berlusconi used his media empire to both control information and create a new political party, accordingly reshaping the political spectrum.

Because of the characteristics of the Italian parliamentary system, Berlusconi was forced to ally with other right-wing parties at odds with one another, the Alleanza Nazionale and Northern League: the first an evolution of the neofascist party Italian Social Movement (MSI), and the second a federalist, xenophobic right-wing party.

Moreover, Berlusconi did not agitate for isolationism and protectionism, did not challenge international market agreements, and did not question Italy's participation in the creation of the European Union and the eurozone — at least not until 2011. Finally, Italy does not play any

hegemonic geopolitical role comparable to that of the United States.

These differences are significant enough to caution against facile predictions about the course of Trump's presidency based on Italian vicissitudes. They do not, however, mean that nothing can be learned from the Italian experience.

On the contrary, we can draw some important lessons if we move our attention away from the apparent similarities between Berlusconi and Trump, and focus instead on the analogies between anti-Berlusconism and the shape anti-Trumpism threatens to take.

Selective Amnesia

In a recent *New York Times* column, Luigi Zingales offers a rather scattershot interpretation of the mistakes made by the opposition to Berlusconi, arguing that prejudicial resistance to all of Berlusconi's acts and popular mobilizations against his government, and an excessive focus on his character, actually worked to strengthen Berlusconi's power instead of weakening it.

In Zingales's interpretation, the only defeats Berlusconi suffered were due to electoral campaigns focused on positive proposals to move forward rather than on bashing Berlusconi's character, by Romano Prodi and Matteo Renzi. From this analysis, Zingales proposes that opponents to Trump should stop the current street demonstrations and show a willingness to cooperate with his administration in Congress on issues around which there is agreement between the president and Democrats against the Republican establishment, like new infrastructure investments [\[1\]](#).

This is a recipe for disaster. Let me set the historical record straight. Berlusconi's first government, in 1994, lasted only seven inglorious months. It was swept away by a combination of heterogeneous factors, but we can identify two of primary importance.

The first was the unruliness of the Northern League, whose votes Berlusconi needed to secure his victory in the North, but to whom he had nothing to offer in exchange. In particular, Berlusconi's attempt to reform the pension system and his inability to pursue a federalist reform ran against the electoral interests of the Northern League, which worried about losing a large part of its working-class support. When the Northern League decided to withdraw its support to the government, Berlusconi was forced to resign.

The second factor was popular mobilization, in particular the general strike called in October 1994 by the three main unions against pension reform, which — according to union sources — saw three million people taking to the streets in ninety cities, and another in November, during which one million people marched in Rome, one of the largest union demonstrations to that date.

But it is what happened after the fall of Berlusconi's first government that offers the most significant lessons for the anti-Trump opposition, for it was thanks to the neoliberal and austerity policies carried out by the center-left in the subsequent six years that Berlusconi's power was consolidated.

First, the technocratic government led by Lamberto Dini between 1995 and 1996 undertook the most devastating reform of the pension system to date, introducing for the first time the contributory scheme meant to progressively replace the retributive system. The reform passed with the support of the center-left and the agreement of the unions, in the name of preventing Berlusconi's return to power at all costs.

In the 1996 elections, the center-left coalition managed to secure a parliamentary majority thanks to

the external support of Rifondazione Comunista and the Northern League's refusal to form a coalition with Berlusconi. The center-left coalition produced the first Prodi government and subsequently Massimo D'Alema's government.

Over the course of five years, center-left governments passed the first labor reforms to introduce massive casualization and significantly erode workers' rights; tried to pass a devastating reform of public education and successfully introduced school autonomy policies that opened the path to a corporate-style management of public schools, as well as neoliberal reforms to higher education; carried out the largest privatization of public companies and assets in Europe to that date; participated in the NATO bombing of Serbia; and passed an immigration law instituting the first detention centers for undocumented migrants.

Finally, D'Alema's government created the infamous "Bicamerale," a bipartisan commission that, D'Alema hoped, would lead to an agreement with Berlusconi on a project of semi-presidential reform of the Constitution that would have strengthened the prerogatives of the executive power at the expense of representation and parliamentary democracy.

With each of these measures, center-left governments only met opposition organized in the streets by the radical left, because unions and center-left voters were willing to swallow everything in the name of preventing Berlusconi's return to power at all costs.

The outcome of these policies was the real beginning of Berlusconi's era, with his victory in the elections of 2001, which secured him a crashing majority both in the Senate and in the Chamber of Deputies. While after 2001 center-left voters took to the streets for anti-Berlusconi demonstrations in defense of democracy and against corruption, center-left MPs continued to cooperate with Berlusconi whenever possible and to protect him from judiciary prosecution, in the same way that they refused to pass a law against Berlusconi's monopoly on information during the Prodi and D'Alema governments.

The icing on the cake was the 2014 deal between Renzi and Berlusconi on constitutional reform and new electoral law, blessed by the president of the republic and former Communist Giorgio Napolitano. It is also worth remembering that Berlusconi actually lost the elections of 2006, and came back to power only after the failure of the Prodi's government to keep its narrow parliamentary majority, due to the defection of a small centrist party (the Union of Democrats for Europe).

Mainstream Italian anti-Berlusconism has always suffered from a grave form of selective amnesia. The effects of six years of harsh austerity policies and virtually no significant social opposition have never been taken into consideration as a decisive causal factor in the consolidation of Berlusconi's power. Nor has mainstream anti-Berlusconism ever shown any willingness to admit the substantial continuity between Berlusconi's second government's austerity policies and those of the center-left.

Berlusconi's attack on labor rights was, for example, just an effort to expand the casualization of work introduced by the center-left (a goal realized years later by the center-left Renzi government through the Jobs Act). His privatizations of public services were primed by the center-left's embrace of the notion that "private" is better.

The center-right's immigration law, which criminalizes illegal immigration, is nothing but an amendment of the previous center-left law. Italian participation in the Afghanistan and Iraq wars was made politically possible by the first violation of Article 11 of the Italian constitution — which prevents Italy from participating in wars of aggression — carried out by D'Alema to allow Italian forces to contribute to the bombing of Serbia.

Mainstream anti-Berlusconism has indeed always preferred to deal in perceptions and impressions, rather than actual facts.

In the anti-Berlusconian imaginary, Berlusconi's rule lasted twenty long years rather than nine, Berlusconi was a fascist, Italian democracy was in danger, the radical left helped consolidate Berlusconi's power because of its sectarianism and unwillingness to cooperate with the center-left, Berlusconi's voters were all racist and misogynistic uneducated losers, the country was constitutively right wing and that was the reason why even moderate Keynesian policies were impossible and why the Left needed to ally with all kinds of neoliberal technocrats, in the name of preventing Berlusconi's return to power at all costs.

Does this sound familiar?

Avoiding the Same Mistakes

The conclusion to this sad story is illuminating.

For all the talk about Berlusconi's fascism, his irresistible media empire and control of public information, his "videocracy," and the end of republican democracy, a week of mild financial terrorism and the alliance of interests between the European Union Commission, the European Central Bank, and the Europeanist sector of Italian capital — with support from the president of the republic and of the center-left — was sufficient to swiftly kick Berlusconi out of office and replace him with Mario Monti's technocratic government. This was the end of the very center-right that in the eyes of mainstream anti-Berlusconians was so invincible only a few months earlier.

And here is the lesson: Italian anti-Berlusconism ended up consolidating and strengthening Berlusconi's power, rather than undermining it, by consistently avoiding the real causes of Berlusconi's success and by justifying and legitimizing years of harsh austerity in the name of preventing Berlusconi's return to power at all costs.

On top of this, it contributed to the self-disintegration of the Italian left [2] and enabled the further neoliberal and technocratic degeneration of the Democratic Party. In 2014, Paolo Flores D'Arcais, director of Micromega and one of the founders of the democratic anti-Berlusconi movement, "I girotondi," which exemplified many of the limitations of mainstream anti-Berlusconism, would claim that Renzi was worse than Berlusconi. At the end of the day it appears that lesser-evilmism delivered the worst.

Anti-Trumpism runs the same risk. Immediately after the presidential elections, the white working class has been targeted by Democratic public opinion-makers as the source of Trump's victory and dismissed as intrinsically racist and grossly uneducated [3]. Third-party voters have been accused of contributing to Clinton's defeat.

Attempts at explaining both working-class voters' support for Trump or abstention in light of the effects of neoliberal globalization and disillusionment with Obama's presidency have been mocked as economic reductionism. And a number of think pieces have commented upon the end of American democracy and the advent of American fascism.

A thoroughly informed analysis of the composition of the Trump vote and of its significance to molecular political changes taking place in the US electorate will have to wait until the end of vote-counting. However, some significant new information seems to have emerged.

It now appears that Trump indeed garnered one million votes more than Romney, and there is a chance that he even fared better than Romney with Latino voters. The margin of Clinton's victory in the popular vote has increased to an astonishing 1.7 million, but Clinton is still down 2.3 million votes compared to Obama in 2012, and it is likely that a number of former Obama supporters voted for Trump. Finally, turnout was higher than in 2012.

What seems to have delivered the victory to Trump is the combination of two main factors. One is, of course, a profoundly undemocratic electoral system [4], which the Democratic Party has never really challenged. A second factor resides in Trump's ability to serve as a catalyst for entirely heterogeneous voting motivations. A significant part of his white electorate has certainly been galvanized by his appalling racism, homophobia, and misogyny and has identified Trump as the agent of revenge for the election of Obama and the nomination of a female candidate.

But a significant component of the vote for Trump cannot be explained without referring to disillusionment with Obama's presidency, to the dramatic social effects of the world economic crisis, delocalizations, and austerity, and to the well-grounded perception of Clinton's entanglements with Wall Street and the old establishment [5].

This heterogeneity of motivations and expectations, combined with the strained relationship between Trump and a large number of Republican officials, represents an element of fragility in Trump's future presidency.

An effective opposition to Trump should work on disentangling these heterogeneous and even incompatible motivations, by, on the one hand, fighting back against the new wave of racism, misogyny, and homophobia ahead of us, and on the other, addressing the legitimate desire for a radical change expressed in part by votes for Trump and in the abstention of millions of former Democratic voters.

This entails working on creating large social coalitions and movements to oppose what is to come, but also abandoning once and for all the idea that lesser-evilmism, which has already caused serious damage, is a viable option.

As the disaster of Italian anti-Berlusconism shows, the only way to effectively oppose authoritarian, racist, and sexist neoliberalism is by offering a radical and credible alternative.

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P.S.

* "The Dangers of Anti-Trumpism". Jacobin. 11.21.16:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/11/trump-trumpism-opposition-democrats-protests-berlusconi/>

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Footnotes

[1] https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/trumps-big-infrastructure-plan-its-a-trap/2016/11/18/5b1d109c-adae-11e6-8b45-f8e493f06fcd_story.html?utm_term=.ba6f6d59d41a

- [2] ESSF (article 39617), [Losing Ground – Italy’s Five Star Movement and the Left’s weakness](#).
- [3] http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/politics/2016/11/there_is_no_such_thing_as_a_good_trump_voter.html
- [4] <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/11/trump-clinton-popular-vote-electoral-college-constitution/>
- [5] <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/05/hillary-clinton-president-walmart-business-feminist/>