

## Forecasting in the Politics of Spectacle, From Berlusconi to Grillo: The Narrative of Impolite Politics

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*Abstract: Two highly significant strengths may be identified in Silvio Berlusconi's communicative strategies during Italian general elections from 1994 to 2008: first, an innovative and skilful use of the narrative as political tool; second, the introduction of impoliteness into Italian political debates. This latter point may be viewed both as an expression of his ability to manage the political arena as a spectacle and as an innovative political skill in the era of visibility and political scandals. His forced retirement from government in 2011, and the subsequent season of understatement brought about by the technocratic government led by Mario Monti, has emphasised the communicative value, for a political leader able to create and manage them, of a narrative and code of impolite politics similar to that of Berlusconi. Such a leader could be identified in Beppe Grillo, whose MoVimento 5 Stelle achieved significant results in the 2012 local elections and dominated the political agenda mainly through Grillo's direct and impolite communicative style which addressed both his political opponents and the MoVimento's 'dissident' militants. What might happen when Grillo, the new Comedian, who already appears as a champion of impolite politics inaugurated by Berlusconi, runs against Berlusconi the old Comedian in the forthcoming general election?*

Keywords: Berlusconi, Grillo, politics as a spectacle, political scandal, storytelling.

### Introduction

Silvio Berlusconi's success in Italian politics can be attributed to three elements: being the first to understand the importance of self-managing one's image; having the ability to build and develop a winning political narrative; being the only Italian politician convincingly to present himself as a 'man of the people'. There is, however, another less easily defined key to understanding his success: the introduction of *impoliteness* into the Italian political debate. This is expressed, first, in a refusal to follow traditional political behaviour (the much discussed novelty of a businessman leading

the country while running his retail businesses and television companies), and secondly, in the ostentation of bad-mannered behaviour in politics (a head of government using swearwords and cracking jokes during official events). The joker reputation he built up after his second victory in the 2001 Italian general election seems to have emphasised the voting public's perception of his distance from the obscure world of politics, even though he had been part of it for almost two decades. Indeed, his opponents' accusations seem to have strengthened him, and the 'rudeness' he introduced to Italian politics seems to have become, if not *the* standard, at least, *a* standard. Despite the worsening of the international economic crisis which led, at the end of 2011, to what could turn out to be the end of the Berlusconi era, the Cavaliere's mix of story-telling and personalisation strategies represented a shift in post-modern politics from which it will be very hard to turn back.

Another new element must be considered as well: the appearance on the Italian political scene – apparently monopolised by Berlusconi, 'the Comedian of politics' (Prospero, 2010) – of Beppe Grillo, who had in fact, actually been a comedian. Grillo, a well-known showman who had built his success on the exhibition of an irreverent style in narrating political and social events ever since the late 1970s, became involved in politics in 2007, albeit with admittedly anti-political aims and with extremely impolite manners. After confronting Italian politicians through two 'Fuck Off' days,<sup>1</sup> Grillo selected 101 candidates and achieved significant results when his movement won control of four city councils. Since May 2012, according to opinion polls, he has become a serious candidate for government in the 2013 general election.

Many communicative traits seem to link Berlusconi and Grillo. Both present themselves as political outsiders, one renewing a rhetorical strategy that was victorious almost twenty years ago, the other, except for some innovative local government experiences, emphasising his unambiguous distance from the halls of power. Both privilege a specific one-way communicative process, one adopting, at every general election, the same strategy of 'occupying' public and private, informational and entertainment, television spaces, the other creating a blog with a tough, one-man editorial board that functions as the official 'voice' of his movement. Both show a very personalised way of managing their political creations, apparently more subject to the rules of a 'family-run business' than to those of a representative political organ: one need only reflect on the fact that Berlusconi was the first politician to put his own name to a party symbol in Italy, and the MoVimento 5 Stelle's name and logo is a registered trademark owned by Grillo himself. Moreover, the movement itself is registered at Grillo's blog's virtual address. Both have shown a political style, ostensibly extraneous to political rituals and inclined to decision making rather than mediation, whether with other political actors

or their own supporters. Both tend to communicate in the most direct way through the use of slogans and narratives which tap into common sense and subvert traditional categories of the symbolic use of language (Edelman, 1988), achieving thereby, the primacy of the narrative in political discourse.

A part of this strategy can be seen as an evolution of the self-management of the politician's image, which Statera (1986) identified as the first communicative skill of a political leader in the era of 'the politics of spectacle'. This is closely connected to the decline of ideological politics and the growing importance of 'the politics of trust'. The new condition of the political leader, addressee of a pact of trust centred on his personal traits, has been eloquently described in what may be called its 'passive dimension' by John B. Thompson, who has pointed out how 'the very reason why scandal has gained a greater significance in political life today is that it serves as a "credibility test" for the politics of trust' (Thompson, 2000: 112) and therefore that the political leader's behaviour must always take into account that 'an indiscreet act, an ill-judged remark or an unwarranted disclosure can have disastrous consequences' (Thompson, 2005: 42). What is suggested is that Berlusconi's experience, and those features of political style he brought to the political communication of the so-called Italian Second Republic, seem to provide sufficient evidence to hypothesise a conscious and active use of inappropriate communicative behaviour.

Observing Berlusconi's campaigns for the 1994 and 2001, and for the 2006 and 2008, general elections on the basis of mainly Italian sources,<sup>2</sup> it is possible to propose a division of his political narrative into two different phases. Since the identity profile of a politician is built on 'the union of negative and positive traits (personal, professional and political) which characterise the candidate and are functional to how he wishes to be perceived by his different target groups' (Cacciotto, 2011: 351), it is possible to identify a first part of Berlusconi's political trajectory as one in which a dream of a new political era is emphasised, and a second part, in which more crude and unconventional behaviour prevails, replacing fairy tales and promises with harsh attacks on political opponents and even on voters not intending to vote for him. This shift seems to have been made possible by the incapacity of other protagonists of the Italian national political scene adequately to embody the figure of the politician-narrator, making it easy for Berlusconi to reduce the complexity of a successful narrative (Denning, 2005; Fontana and Sgreva, 2011; Moltedo and Palumbo, 2011). The first part of the narrative, (the problem - explaining what is dysfunctional for the country), gradually prevailed over the second (supplying the solution and describing a vision of the country once the dysfunctional elements have been overcome) and the third (explaining why that candidate, and only that candidate, is suitable to saving the country).

On the basis of this hypothesis, and considering that the general election campaigns of Berlusconi and Grillo will result in a clash between two incompatible impolite political narratives, it is possible to attempt some forecasts about where this radicalisation of the politics of spectacle could lead us.

### **Politics as spectacle and the power of the narrative**

According to Salmon (2007), the first attempt at the creation of storytelling politics can be identified in Richard M. Nixon's decision to organise a White House Office of Communications. Post-modern Presidents – Nixon wrote in his memoirs – 'must be masters in the art of manipulating the media, not only to win elections, but also to complete their charge and to support the causes they believe in' (Nixon, 1978: 354). The politician must try to master the art of manipulating the media, while at the same time avoiding, at all costs, the accusation that they are trying to do so. The creation of this post-modern propaganda office is the starting point both for the growing significance of the figure of the spin doctor on the presidential staff – officially introduced in 1984 by Ronald Reagan's counsellors – and for the belief that a good story is as necessary for winning elections as it is for ruling a country. This was reconfirmed by Bill Clinton's invention of story spinners and George W. Bush's *Sharazad* strategy (Cornog, 2004).

Italian politics came to this post-modern era later than the United States, but earlier than the rest of Europe, and it did so in such a way that it has made Italy an irreplaceable social laboratory for international scholars such as Edward C. Banfield (1958) and Sydney G. Tarrow (1967). In 1986, the Italian sociologist Gianni Statera argued that the self-management of one's image and by implication, its consequent removal from the distorting lens of the media, as well as the imposition of a precise interpretive frame on media coverage, was necessary for political leaders to prove themselves in the politics of spectacle. He based his study on an analysis of the political careers of the Socialist President of the Republic Sandro Pertini, the Radical Party leader, Marco Pannella and the Socialist Prime Minister, Bettino Craxi. In 1994, Statera admitted that this quality was perfectly embodied in Silvio Berlusconi. He argued that this was clearly illustrated by Berlusconi's specific media know-how as well as his control of a significant part of the media system; by the fairy tale of a businessman who had come from nowhere and had been chosen to come to the aid of his country; by the construction of his vision of the Italian electorate through the results of opinion polls; by his political commitment to the television world of soap operas, quizzes, reality shows and mass culture movies portraying characters representing the hedonistic culture that established itself in the 1980s and which still today permeates what may be called the 'Italian spirit' (Valentini, 2009). These are certainly the main elements of

Berlusconi's earlier success, and of a political and narrative strategy that could be easily applied to his successful campaigns in the 1994 and 2001 Italian general elections.

In 1994, personalisation strategies were the first tools to explain Berlusconi's success; he won because he knew better than his opponents how to self-manage his image, and could apply this communicative strategy to new TV programmes dealing with the election and aired by both his privately owned TV stations and the more traditional public broadcasters. Furthermore, he won because, not only did his opponents not know how to manage their own television images, but also because they mocked the narration Berlusconi was building and the commercials he took advantage of (Morcellini, 1995). The way the left-wing party leader Achille Occhetto<sup>3</sup> stigmatised the differences between the two political offers from which the voters were called upon to choose, during a programme called *Al voto al voto* ('To the polls, to the polls'), on 15 February, is symptomatic:

There is a difference between our government and that of Berlusconi since Berlusconi says that we need to reduce taxes and lower the public debt: that we need to create a serene life for the elderly and take away money from the pension system; we need to cure the sick and close hospitals. We've all seen Berlusconi's TV ad which looks like the ad from Mulino Bianco<sup>4</sup> (Statera, 1994: 154).

The left-wing coalition led by Achille Occhetto failed to recognise both the new marketing strategies introduced by Silvio Berlusconi's 'Mulino Bianco' campaign, and the innovative use of narrative tactics applied to the presentation of an electoral story. For example, instead of explaining the way in which a proposed economic reform programme could relate to the international situation, Berlusconi preferred to provide evidence of his extraneousness to 'traditional' politics, and his identification with a vision that saw economics as *work to be done* rather than as a *science to be practiced*. The story is that of a successful businessman who is forced to leave the work he loves to come to his country's aid. 'The story is old. We know it well. We learned it at school: the homeland calls and the hero - simple and unselfish - takes up the challenge' (Abruzzese, 1994: 16).

His ignorance of the places and mental schemes of traditional politics, the institutional culture's disdain for a man who adventures into an unknown world, who knows and uses the secrets of the market culture and who has no respect for the symbols of representative democracy, all contribute to Berlusconi's success. He is seen (and depicted) as a 'TV Cowboy, consumer whore, assassin of democracy [...] Such a pity that, whether because of too much admiration or too much fear, the collective imagination loves exactly this kind of adventurer' (Ivi: 30-31).

The 2001 general election campaign is to be mentioned for two interesting reasons, both linked to the political and journalistic ability to

put together a narrative. First of all, Berlusconi made use of innovative and, at the same time tried and tested communicative strategies with the publication of the electoral photo story, *Una Storia Italiana* ('An Italian story'). Posted to millions of Italian families, this booklet, by juxtaposing official and private-life images, presented a story of success and sacrifice, and of hope and fear – in short, the story of Forza Italia's founder and at the same time, the introduction of the myth of the self-made-man into the Italian political scene (Boni, 2008).

When necessary, Berlusconi describes reality as a fairy-tale, switching continuously between reality and appearance [...] For example, the 'appearance' of an Italian left-wing party that has never been in power, except for the short parenthesis of the Ulivo, becomes the 'reality' of a country, Italy, ruined by decades of secret government of the Left [...] In the same way, the appearance of a 'judges' party' nobody could ever really verify, becomes real through the continuous, almost obsessive repetition of a communicative message (Amadori, 2002: 28).

It is interesting to note, as Amadori points out, a significant shift over time in Berlusconi's narration, which begins to centre on a characterisation of the enemy rather than on the description of a realm of peace and justice that will arise once the hero achieves his deserved victory. This, as already mentioned above, is something quite different from the 1994 'Mulino Bianco' narration.

Secondly, the left-wing coalition enabled Berlusconi to present himself as the victim of a conspiracy, organised by the politicians and media representing the powers that be, aimed at preventing him from taking charge of the country's destiny. In light of Berlusconi's conflict of interests, deriving from his ownership of a media empire, and the serious judicial charges against him, the left-wing coalition presented the election as a referendum on Berlusconi's fitness to rule Italy. This was undertaken through multiple attacks against him. On 14 March, the well-known comedian, Daniele Luttazzi, hosted the journalist, Marco Travaglio, on his satirical programme, *Satyricon*. Travaglio was the author of a book entitled *L'odore dei soldi* ('The smell of money'), which critically investigated the origins and growth of Berlusconi's empire. This included the secret financial mechanisms underlying the foundation of Berlusconi's broadcasting company, Fininvest, the difficulties encountered in explaining the money's origin, the presence in Berlusconi's mansion of the Mafia boss Vittorio Mangano and some potentially compromising statements made by Paolo Borsellino, a magistrate killed in the 1992 massacres. On 23 March, during an episode of *Il Raggio Verde* ('The green ray'), a talk show presented by Michele Santoro, Indro Montanelli, one of the oldest and most revered Italian journalists, clarified his break with Silvio Berlusconi, the

owner of the newspaper he had been editing for years, identifying two very different Berlusconis: one, the impartial newspaper owner, the other, a man not averse to using undemocratic methods to impose his own editorial line. On 28 March, Montanelli went even further, and, interviewed by Enzo Biagi, declared his fear of Berlusconi and his hope that Berlusconi would win the general election since he was like a virus – and only by being ‘immunised’ through catching this virus could Italians be ‘cured’ of him. These attacks, which were a sort of serialised narrative aimed at damaging Berlusconi, could also rely on an important inquiry by the *Economist*, which, on 26 April published an article entitled “Why Silvio Berlusconi is unfit to lead Italy”.

### Phenomenology of impolite politics

While the 1994 and 2001 campaigns developed under the aegis of fairy tale narratives, the same cannot be said for the 2006 and 2008 campaigns. Here it is possible clearly to identify signs of Berlusconi’s new turn to impoliteness as a strategy. The communicative style of the Cavaliere now becomes more aggressive, and is now punctuated by impolite episodes.

An un-written ‘rule’ of Italian politics is that after five years of government, the outgoing administration loses the general election. Accordingly, the 2006 campaign seemed plainly destined to result in the victory of the left-wing candidate, Romano Prodi, over the incumbent Berlusconi. But Berlusconi managed to create a spectacular campaign based on systematic disregard for the rules of politics, journalism and courtesy. Two important episodes illustrate this strategy.

At the beginning of the campaign, on 12 March, as guest on the Sunday evening program *In mezz'ora* (‘In half an hour’), hosted by Lucia Annunziata,<sup>5</sup> Berlusconi ignored the interviewer’s questions and spoke about what he *knew* mattered to Italian voters; facing the hostility of Annunziata, he got up and left the programme. In keeping with her programme’s mission, Annunziata started the conversation on themes rather far removed from the election issues of the moment: Berlusconi’s unresolved conflict of interests; the departure of Daniele Luttazzi, Michele Santoro and Enzo Biagi from public broadcast television after Berlusconi’s victory in 2001, and the size of Mediaset’s advertising turnover. Berlusconi, however, insisted on talking about “why voters should vote for us and not for the Left”, but Annunziata firmly replied: “I want to enjoy the privilege of being one of the few people who can ask you questions, and not only have to hear what is required for me to hear”. Ten minutes before the end of the programme, the communicative pact finally broke down and Berlusconi announced: “Either allow me the courtesy of speaking or I will get up and leave”; Annunziata lost all interest in talking about current or past affairs, and demanded that Berlusconi withdraw his statement,

because “‘I will stand up and leave’ is something you can’t say here”. In the ‘third age of political communication’ (Blumler and Kavanagh, 1999), when the roles of politicians and journalists intermingle, a conflict between two key figures such as Berlusconi and Annunziata can bring enormous benefits to the contenders: however, when one of them is able to frame the other's attitude in a coherent political narration, his advantage is clearly greater.

In the final days of the campaign, on 4 April, participating in a meeting of the employers’ organisation, Confindustria, Berlusconi once again expressed himself in an extremely impolite manner: “I have too much respect for the Italians to believe that there are so many assholes around willing to vote against their own interests”.

Both the incident with Annunziata, and his comments at the Confindustria meeting, were part of a very advantageous communicative strategy. They allowed Berlusconi to dictate the campaign agenda through a series of extraordinary expressions of opinion, which were launched over and over again by the mass media.<sup>6</sup> In both cases, the political debate focused on Berlusconi’s apparent inability to manage polite interaction: in the first case, with someone representing a partisan audience, a journalist whose role is to ask questions and not stand by passively while allowing the politician to hold forth; in the second case, with an electorate forcedly divided between ‘thinking voters’ (supporting Berlusconi’s political offer) and ‘asshole voters’ (refusing it). However, in both cases, Berlusconi embodied something even more important than the main character of a story: i.e. a storyteller holding the secret of what is important for millions of Italian voters. Furthermore, it is possible to imagine a positive reaction from the electorate towards the ‘spontaneous’ reactions of a man who feels hedged in by the ‘good manners’ of ‘traditional’ political debate. Indeed, Berlusconi’s defeat by Prodi in 2006 was much narrower than had been expected on the basis of the results of surveys conducted during the campaign. Here one is tempted to put forward a daring hypothesis: gaffes and even scandals that are usually dangerous for political leaders (Thompson, 1995; 2000), can become unbeatable weapons in the hands of an able politician, not only making the leader ‘a people’s man’, but also constructing an anti-institutional and in some ways, anti-political view of the world in which tradition, rules, and ‘good manners’ are worthless left-overs from the past.

The same ‘rule of alternation’ that applied in 2006, applied at the 2008 election, coming, as it did, after an unsolvable crisis in the left-wing government.<sup>7</sup> In 2008 Berlusconi was bound to be voted back into power, despite the efforts of his opponent, Walter Veltroni,<sup>8</sup> to present a party, a programme, and a selection of candidates very distant from the left-wing tradition, and in a clear break with Prodi’s government (Morcellini and Prospero, 2009).



In the 2008 general election Berlusconi's communication was less 'spectacular' than on other occasions, much less marked by the promise of 'miracles' and more focussed on describing a crisis situation that would have been difficult to solve without him. Nor was Berlusconi able to exploit a frontal assault by the left-wing candidate, and thereby bring new sympathy to the 'victim' of the 'communist conspiracy', since Walter Veltroni did not even name his opponent, preferring to talk about "the main representative of the adversary coalition". But one element of Berlusconi's previous winning strategy remained: the ability to apply storytelling tools to political narration. While Veltroni was talking about "fifteen years of bad politics" from which the country had to distance itself in order "to get Italy going again", Berlusconi identified a precise enemy to defeat: the left-wing coalition that was trying to sell itself as 'new', while presenting a leader who was still fully involved in the Italian post-communist tradition. Above all, Berlusconi offered both a concrete remedy to 'bring peace back to the land', and a willingness to enter the political fray once again to 'save' Italy (Prospero and Ruggiero, 2010).

Furthermore, Berlusconi did not give up on a dramatisation of the campaign. He not only focussed on the serious rubbish removal emergency in Naples and the necessity to 'save' the Italian national airline, Alitalia, from foreign take over, but he also resorted to spectacular expedients, such as publically ripping up Veltroni's intended political programme to 'prove' that it was nothing but a pack of lies and quite unworthy of even being read. On another occasion, on 15 March, when interviewed for the election supplement of the news bulletin broadcast by RaiDue, the second public TV station, he faced a young woman who asked him what she should do to solve her precarious employment situation. The answer he gave was simple: "Marry Berlusconi's son or the son of someone like Berlusconi". In other contexts, such a gaffe would have demanded, if not actual resignation, at least some public excuse. In Italy, in the 2008 campaign, not only did it do no damage to Berlusconi, but it actually increased his popularity (Diamanti, 2011).

### **The war of the comedians**

The effects of the world economic crisis combined with the weakness of the Italian economy forced Berlusconi to resign in mid November 2011, leaving his fourth government mandate incomplete. A technocratic government, led by the former European Commissioner, Mario Monti, and made up of non-political ministers, among whom were many academics, took over. The limited familiarity in dealing with the media displayed by Monti's technocratic ministers represented an unknown for journalists and political audiences. Their presence in talk shows forced the talking heads of the Italian political scene to adapt to more polite debating rules, by building a

climate of narrative suspension which was destined to be set aside in the run-up to the 2013 general election.

As if in anticipation of the end of this suspension, in May and October 2012, when local elections were held in over a thousand municipalities and for the Sicilian regional government, citizens' distrust of politics resulted in spectacular advances for the MoVimento 5 Stelle (Five-star movement), led by the well-known comedian Beppe Grillo. As the 'Fuck Off' days had shown, Grillo wanted to present himself as the new face of Italian political ethics (McDonnell and Splendore, 2008; Donovan and Onofri, 2008). Indeed, the Italian media defined these 'Fuck Off' days as a most successful example of 'grassroots democracy'. Roncarolo (2009: 155) acknowledged Grillo's communicative ability and described him as being:

a comedian and explosive speaker who crystallized the widespread disenchantment with the political elite and made it visible, by creating arenas [...] and opportunities for protest against politicians' failure to tackle the country's problems.

In the 2012 elections Grillo seemed to capitalise very well on this ability. Given Berlusconi's temporary absence from the political scene, media coverage focused, not without with some pleasure, on the other comedian's campaign, which consisted of a skilful mix of on-line pronouncements and local appearances. Grillo's strategy of choosing candidates only according to their curricula; excluding anyone who had any criminal charges against them, and refusing any political affiliation or alliance, placed him above the political arena and guaranteed him a special kind of honourability, since he apparently had no connection with the establishment. At the same time, as he was a recognised political outsider, the fiery rhetoric he used, whether on his blog or in local public debates subsequently taken up by TV broadcasters and the Web, allowed him to take advantage of the figure of 'man of the people' (or 'easygoing leader' or 'comedian/joker') that Berlusconi had cultivated for over a decade.

In addition to the possibility of attracting voters from crisis-ridden right-wing parties, Grillo could count on some strong narrative-based points: the story of a man who chooses to put aside his profitable work to come to the aid of his country; the fight against corrupt and incompetent politicians. These points, while certainly containing a number of novel elements, were still all very similar to those of the first Berlusconi 'story'. To this should be added, as mentioned above, candidates chosen on the basis of their curricula and who did not represent a given political idea but rather only their own story. In this, one is reminded of the government members George W. Bush presented to the nation on March 2001 (Brooks, 2001).<sup>9</sup>

It is also possible to include Grillo's strategy in the phase of impolite politics Berlusconi opened with his 2001 victory – with, however, one key difference: Grillo skips the 'fairy tale' stage, focusing his strategy on an attack on a number of political opponents, who very soon become real enemies. The claim to be the only political group using the democratic possibilities offered by the Internet is made through war metaphors (Rigotti, 1992):

There is an ongoing war between two worlds, two different conceptions of reality. It may appear slow, almost imperceptible, but in reality it is bitter and fast, characterised by continuous ambushes and sudden advances. It is hidden by the media, feared by the politicians, thwarted by international organisations, opposed by multinationals' (Grillo and Casaleggio, 2011: vii).

No allies seem to be available to come to the help of the hero Grillo: even the men and women who won seats in the local elections seem bound to betray their leader. For example, Parma's mayor, Federico Pizzarotti, tries to bring Valentino Tavolazzi, a manager in the town council of Ferrara who had been thrown out of the MoVimento a few weeks after Pizzarotti's victory, into his government team. Moreover, for Grillo, the media is solidly against his MoVimento and he forces people who have dealings with it out of his organisation. This contrasts with Berlusconi for whom there are good as well as bad interlocutors in the media.

Between August and December 2012 two episodes illustrated Grillo's 'I'm-the-only-good-one' narrative style. During the mid-August holiday, the daily newspaper, *la Repubblica*, revealed that some of the MoVimento's regional councillors in Emilia Romagna had paid local media to obtain visibility on TV and radio information programmes. Among these, the figure of Giovanni Favia stood out. Favia was not new to episodes of non-compliance with Grillo's 'thou-shalt-not-go-public-on-the-media' commandment even though he used this opportunity to complain about the difficulties encountered by the MoVimento in obtaining favourable media coverage. In this scandal the media focused mainly on the MoVimento's use of public funds by Favia. Yet on the pages of his blog, Grillo, intervened only against Favia's use of television, claiming that: 'For the MoVimento 5 Stelle, paying to go on television is like paying to go to one's funeral'.<sup>10</sup>

On 30 October, another representative of the MoVimento, Federica Salsi, a town councillor in Bologna, gained sudden celebrity status by participating in a TV show, and, most of all, by being blamed by Grillo for doing so. The day after her participation in the political talk show *Ballarò*, Grillo criticised her television presence on his blog, speaking against 'The G-spot, the one that gives you an orgasm in talk show saloons'.<sup>11</sup> The episode was quickly connected to 'Favia-gate' mentioned above, but the

absence of indictments on the part of Grillo, aside from the breaking of his clearly set rule, and his explicit sexual reference related to a young woman, made the Salsi incident particularly inappropriate in the eyes of media. Moreover, the two stories soon converged, when, on 12 December, Grillo withdrew the right to use the MoVimento's symbol from both Favia and Salsi – a radical decision that followed harsh statements in the previous days, such as 'Don't come and break my balls, me of all people, about democracy'.<sup>12</sup>

Grillo's sudden wrath against Favia and Salsi seems difficult to understand given that extra-parliamentary parties and movements have, historically, been successful through the use of spectacular expedients.<sup>13</sup> Grillo's reaction was driven by the fact that the two 'sinners' made massive use of all available media forums to defend their positions, thereby starting a personalisation process which was hardly tolerable in a 'personal movement' such as Grillo's MoVimento. Some elements supporting this reading came early in September, when the TV show *Piazza Pulita* ('Clean sweep') made an off-air conversation between Favia and the journalist Gaetano Pecoraro public. The regional councillor Favia referred to a complete lack of internal democracy in the MoVimento; to the excessive power of Grillo's consultant Gianroberto Casaleggio (a "very cold and calculating mind" who seems to make all the political decisions in place of Grillo), and to Casaleggio's strategy of preventing the MoVimento's representatives from appearing in the media as a means of maintaining control over the movement. Similarly, in the first two weeks of November, the most important Italian newspapers applauded Salsi's agreement with the militants in Bologna; and, on the day of her 'banishment', Salsi told 'her truth' about Grillo and his movement in the in-depth TV programme *Otto e Mezzo* ('Half past eight').

In this form of radicalised impolite politics, 'peace in the kingdom' can only be achieved through the total destruction of all enemies – whether internal or external – though what will follow this apocalypse? While Berlusconi's seductiveness has been made durable by

his ability to alternate between the light-hearted moments of the carefree child, which breaks up the flow of the events of the real world, with the harsh imposition of his authority, based on his immense power and ability to deal with the complaints of his own allies (Prospero, 2010: 56),

Grillo's strength seems to reside completely in his own, lonely, wicked, destructive power. This new kind of powerful narration, linked to impolite politics, will be put to the test in the competition with the champion of the politics of spectacle, Silvio Berlusconi, in the upcoming Italian general election campaign. In July 2012, worn down by the pressure of continual renewal over a period lasting four government terms, Berlusconi

announced his decision not to run for office again. But soon after the secretary of the Democratic Party, Pier Luigi Bersani, won his party's primary elections at the beginning of December, Berlusconi, announced that he would enter the political arena once again.

After months of forced public understatement and economic sacrifices imposed by Monti's government, the Italian political agenda is again filled with the classic Berlusconi pre-campaign issues: in a spectacular number of TV appearances – a prelude to a great investment in TV campaigning that could call into question the expected 'decline of videocracy' in Italy (Ruggiero, 2011)<sup>14</sup> – the Cavaliere has again proposed the story of the nobleman who hates politics but must intervene for the country's safety; has promised the abolition of one of the most hated taxes recently introduced on the ownership of real estate; has attacked both Bersani, son of the hated Communist tradition that would be re-established if the left wing were to win, and Monti, guilty of having placed the unfair demands of the European Community, led by German economic interests, above the wealth of the country and its citizens. This is a position, which matches that of Grillo's statements about the Monti government exactly. Thus, even if not yet official, the challenge has already begun. An anti-political attitude seems to be predominant in Italy, and both Berlusconi and Grillo are certainly able to manage it well, one by exploiting his tried and tested narratives, the other by facing his political adversaries outside the arena of the halls of power – just as the Cavaliere had done in his early years.

Yet, there is another aspect to be considered: Berlusconi has always won against political opponents he could accuse of belonging to the 'old' political world – from Achille Occhetto to Walter Veltroni – or having poor communicative skills – such as Romano Prodi. An 'explosive speaker' such as Grillo can easily neutralise such a 'competitive advantage'. In a war between the two comedians, Berlusconi could find himself trapped on an unfamiliar battlefield, where he might have simultaneously to attack and defend himself against both Grillo and the other candidates. Indeed, for the first time, he could be forced, to resort to different strategies for different enemies. In such an uncomfortable position, Berlusconi could be tempted to raise the level of the political conflict even more against Grillo, an opponent who will have an enormous advantage over him since the old comedian will be fighting to preserve his power and feed an electoral machine looking to him for resources, while the new comedian will have almost nothing to lose. Indeed, Grillo has the advantage of entering national politics, as Berlusconi had almost twenty years ago, without his job or popularity depending on it. The clash between these two figures, both experts in the art of shaking up the political field, could trigger a communicative short-circuit, potentially more dangerous for Berlusconi than for Grillo.

In this context, the candidacy of Mario Monti assumes considerable significance – not only because, as Berlusconi himself admitted during the interview with Massimo Giletti in the Sunday afternoon infotainment programme, *L’Arena*, the resigning Prime Minister could be the only leader able to attract the moderate electorate, but mostly because of the possible consequences of the above-mentioned short-circuit. Before the arrival of Grillo, the presence of one comedian fighting against political forces for the most part respectful of political rituals and politeness (non-written rules such as: consider your opponent as an adversary, not as an enemy) created the conditions for Berlusconi’s success. The situation in 2013, however, is quite different. On the political battlefield, there will be two comedians plus a left-wing candidate, Bersani, recently legitimated by the primary elections, and, for the first time since the beginning of the so-called Second Republic in 1994, a credible moderate leader, Mario Monti, who is strengthened by strong approval and support at both the national and international levels. Even though his reputation has been compromised by the economic sacrifices linked to his name, his respectability could be decisive in the attempt to rebuild trust and bring about the normalisation of politics. This is significant since Italian voters might very well feel the need for this normalisation if the contrast between the two comedians were to go too far.

In conclusion, the contest between the two comedians could represent an unexpected challenge for Italian politics: it could put an end to the so-called Second-Republic experience and show the limits of a political system dominated by the overwhelming personality of Silvio Berlusconi. It could dampen enthusiasm for anti-political experiences and start a new era, which would find a much needed balance between stories as opposed to policies, performance as opposed to substance, spectacle as opposed to politics.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The first one took place in September 2007 in Piazza Maggiore in Bologna where 80,000 people protested against parliamentarians caught up in criminal proceedings. The second one took place in April 2008 in many Italian piazzas, to collect signatures demanding the abolition of public funding for the press, the abolition of the Order of Journalists, and the abolition of the Gasparri Law on the broadcasting system.

<sup>2</sup> Even if this article takes the scientific production of the most important observatories and research groups in political communication in Italy into consideration, it is first and foremost based on the research results of the Mediamonitor Political Observatory of the University of Rome “La Sapienza”, which has been working on Italian political communication since 1994. More information is available at [www.mediamonitor-politica.it](http://www.mediamonitor-politica.it).

<sup>3</sup> Secretary of the former Italian Communist Party in the so-called Second Republic. After the huge political scandals following the *Tangentopoli* ('Bribe city') inquiries, into illegal party funding, that had led to the collapse of both the Christian Democrats and the Socialist Party, Occhetto's Democratic Party of the Left, heir to the Communist tradition, and scarcely touched by the *Tangentopoli* scandal, was convinced that victory in the 1994 general election, was close at hand.

<sup>4</sup> A famous Italian brand for snacks, showing in its ads a happy family living harmoniously near a white mill, or a small baker trying to conquer his loved one's heart with new kinds of biscuits and sweets.

<sup>5</sup> A professional journalist since 1976, Lucia Annunziata has been foreign correspondent for the most important left-wing newspapers. In 1995, she came back to Italy inaugurating, with *Linea Tre* ('Line three'), a model of in-depth television programming characterised by an interviewing style that was pugnacious towards politicians. President of the Italian broadcasting corporation, Radiotelevisione Italiana (RAI), from 2003 to 2004, she is considered one of the most influential and, despite her political affiliations, one the most 'independent' Italian journalists.

<sup>6</sup> The 'asshole-voters' scandal was, with the promise to eliminate the hated domestic property tax, the main theme for three important talk shows on the night of 4 April: *Otto e mezzo* ('Half past eight'), aired on the private broadcast network, La7, and hosted by Giuliano Ferrara and Ritanna Armeni; *Ballarò*, the prime-time talk show, broadcast by the third public television network, hosted by Giovanni Floris, and *Primo Piano* ('Front line'), an in-depth programme linked to the news bulletins, *Tg3*, broadcast by the third public network, hosted by Maurizio Mannoni. *Primo Piano* dedicated the following two episodes to the issue. It was the main theme of the morning talk show, *Omnibus*, and the daily programme, *Dopo Tg1* ('After Tg1'), on 5 April and of the Italia1 talk show, *L'incudine* ('The anvil') and *Markette*, the satirical programme aired by La7 on 6 April (Antenore, Bruno and Laurano, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> A situation which might seem similar is that of the 1996 campaign. However, given the forced normalisation that characterised that campaign, it was substantially different to the 2008 campaign. Accordingly, it will not be discussed here.

<sup>8</sup> Representative of the Italian Communist Party since 1976, Veltroni had a very important role in renewing its cultural politics, with huge investments in both the audiovisual media (cinema and television) and outdoor cultural events. Elected Mayor of Rome in 2001 and 2006, he stood down before the end of his second term in order to run in the 2008 general election. He gave the left-wing coalition a new structure, excluding radical-left parties that had been part of it since Romano Prodi's Ulivo ('Olive-tree coalition') in 1996, and founded the Democratic Party.

<sup>9</sup> In the context of politics becoming more and more personalised and based on a pact of trust with single representatives of political parties and movements, it is becoming important for a political leader to 'demonstrate' not only his personal and professional competences, but also those of his candidates. The most cited example is that of George W. Bush's *Sharazade strategy*: in January 2001, President Bush presented the members of his government talking about their personal lives, and affirming that these stories represented *what America could be and should be*. It therefore seems possible to link this narrative strategy to the importance Grillo puts on the 'publicity' of his candidates' curricula: on the one hand, it is a kind of

'full transparency' operation; on the other, considering the MoVimento 5 Stelle's aim to change the country by changing its political élite, it is a clear call to the stories of the MoVimento's men and women, who implicitly claim to represent *what Italy could be and should be*.

<sup>10</sup> See [www.beppegrillo.it/2012/08/pagare\\_per\\_anda.html](http://www.beppegrillo.it/2012/08/pagare_per_anda.html).

<sup>11</sup> See [www.beppegrillo.it/2012/10/il\\_talk\\_show\\_ti\\_uccide.html](http://www.beppegrillo.it/2012/10/il_talk_show_ti_uccide.html).

<sup>12</sup> See [www.reuters.com/article/2012/12/12/us-italy-vote-grillo-idUSBRE8BB1BR20121212](http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/12/12/us-italy-vote-grillo-idUSBRE8BB1BR20121212).

<sup>13</sup> In 1978, Radical Party leaders Emma Bonino and Marco Pannella obtained a slot on the programme dedicated to party-political broadcasts, *Tribuna Elettorale*, only to spend their allotted time gagged and bound to their seats, to demonstrate against what they perceived as misinformation on the part of state television broadcasters.

<sup>14</sup> From Sunday evening infotainment shows such as *Domenica Live* ('Sunday live') (aired on the private channel, Canale5, on 16 December) and *L'Arena* (aired on the public TV channel, RaiUno, on 23 December), to the morning news programme *UnoMattina* (broadcast on RaiUno on 27 December) and more traditional talk shows such as *Quinta Colonna* ('Fifth column') (aired on Canale5 on 18 December) and *Porta a Porta* ('From door to door') (broadcast on RaiUno, also on 18 December).

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