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## Antifascism, anticommunism, antipolitics: delegitimation in Berlusconi's Italy

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### ABSTRACT

Post-1994 delegitimizing discourses borrowed a lot from antifascism and anticommunism, which they updated to fit the new historical circumstances. Yet, with the events of 1992–94, the role, credibility, autonomy, and boundaries of the Italian political sphere entered a crisis, and this turned arguments about politics and antipolitics into new instruments of delegitimation. This article analyzes how delegitimizing traditions survived the end of the Cold War, and how they interacted with the new issues generated by Tangentopoli. Section 2 describes Berlusconi's anticommunism, nurtured by the persistence of pre-1989 memories, but also by three present-oriented arguments: the fact that the communists had been able to survive the end of communism; their being professional politicians; and their statism. Section 3 deals with antiberlusconism, which is also composed of three threads: antifascism; the refusal of the 'spirit of the Eighties'; and moralism. The final section of the article connects post-1994 delegitimizing discourses with the conflict between two opposed solutions to the crisis of the political, both fraught with contradictions: Berlusconi's offer of less politics; and the conviction of the left that the correct answer was not less, but good politics.

**KEYWORDS** Anticommunism; antifascism; antipolitics; moralism; Berlusconi; Tangentopoli

### 1. Introduction

Berlusconi's Italy has been riddled with political fears. In a poll published in 2006, 77 per cent of left-wing voters answered that they were either afraid or very afraid of Berlusconi; 57 per cent of right-wing voters said the same of communism (Itanes 2006b, 112). This article analyzes some of the discourses that, from 1994 until 2011, aimed to consolidate those percentages and make them grow.

Delegitimation has been a complicated game in post-1994 Italian politics. It has gone on for more than two decades, and with the participation of innumerable players. Moreover, while we cannot say that scholarship on this period is scarce, historical analysis is in its infancy<sup>1</sup> – both for the obvious reason that

we are dealing with very recent events, and because they have generated a significant amount of controversy. These remarks are particularly true for anti-berlusconism. Opposition to Berlusconi has notoriously been very passionate; it has come from different quarters, both political and intellectual; it has used a wide array of arguments and instruments; it has been conducted on a number of different levels – and it is still largely understudied.

Purporting to give a full account of this ‘delegitimation game’ in a journal article would be foolish. Antiberlusconism alone deserves a monograph. I shall aim at a more modest target, that is, to provide a first conceptual map of the post-1994 delegitimizing discourses: what arguments were used and how they were connected to one another. In order to reach that target, I shall analyze two sets of documents: Berlusconi’s speeches, on the one hand, and a selection of writings of antiberlusconian intellectuals and – to a lesser extent – politicians, on the other. Being limited in both scope and sources, this article can provide only very partial answers, if any, to a number of questions: the actual historical weight of the delegitimizing discourses; their frequency; their impact; and, above all, how they have been used in political contingencies, that is, how they have evolved over time.

Continuity and discontinuity in delegitimizing discourses before and after the 1992–94 historical watershed provide a first analytical focus to our conceptual map. To a significant extent, reciprocal political delegitimation in the 1994–2011 period was built upon the antifascist and anticommunist rhetorics that had characterized the previous decades, and that the other articles in this journal describe. Yet the collapse of the communist bloc, on the one hand, and the many original elements of Berlusconiism, on the other, required some measure of innovation. What were the extent and nature of the innovation? This is one of the questions that I shall try to answer.

A second analytical focus derives from the 1992–94 political and institutional ‘earthquake’ itself, which considerably increased the relevance of the politics/antipolitics cleavage in the Italian public sphere as a potential source for reciprocal delegitimation. In the last thirty years, methodological reflections aimed at renewing political history have argued that its object – namely, politics – should be historicized and problematized. Both the actual nature, role, extent, and boundaries of politics, and the discourses that surround them, are a product of history, contingencies, and conflicts, and should never be considered as a given. Semantic shifts from ‘politics’ to ‘the political’ and from ‘political history’ to ‘history of the political’ are meant to express this awareness (Rémond 1988; Rosanvallon 2003; Steinmetz, Gilcher-Holtey, and Haupt 2013). It is, of course, no coincidence that the ‘discovery’ of the historical mutability of the political has grown so much stronger in the last three decades, that is, at a time when the political has undergone a number of momentous transformations – pertaining to the relationship between state and market, national and supranational, public and private, political discretion and technocratic ‘objectivity’.

In Italy, the mutation of the political – which we could also call ‘crisis’ – has been deeper and more traumatic than elsewhere in the West. As a consequence, the suggestions of the ‘new’ history of the political can be particularly useful when it comes to analyzing the last quarter century of Italian politics. That is to say, those years can be interpreted, among other things, as the period when the country (largely unsuccessfully, alas) endeavored to solve the crisis of the political that had climaxed in 1992–94. In our perspective here, this means that after 1994, political delegitimation was not just built upon the cleavages and conflicts *internal* to the political sphere, such as those that were generated by the antifascist and anticommunist traditions. It was also built upon the conflicts *on* the political sphere: its nature, its dignity, and, above all, its boundaries and autonomy in relation to other spheres. Political conflicts – it goes without saying – are always and everywhere to a relevant extent conflicts *on*, rather than *within*, the political. My argument here is that this has particularly been the case in the last twenty-five years of Italian history. How delegitimation was built upon conflicts both *within* and *on* the political sphere, and how ‘conflicts within’ and ‘conflicts on’ interacted, is what I shall try to ascertain in the following pages, by analyzing Berlusconi’s anticommunism in section 2; antiberlusconism and its antifascist roots in section 3; and drawing some conclusions on the crisis of the political and the delegitimizing mechanisms that it generated in section 4.

## 2. Berlusconi’s anticommunism

Berlusconi’s anticommunism, developed as it was after the collapse of the Soviet bloc, has often been met with sarcasm. This attitude is not at all gratuitous. Yet it is also part of the antiberlusconian delegitimizing mechanisms that I shall consider in section 3. And it contributed to making the success of Berlusconi’s anticommunist propaganda – which did not lack roots, as we saw at the very beginning of this article – difficult to understand and explain. What were the arguments of this propaganda, then? How did it connect with ‘traditional’, pre-1989 anticommunism? And how could it survive the fall of the Berlin Wall?

Berlusconi’s exploitation of the sheer persistence of a particularly deep and long-lasting attitude – a psychological inertia of sorts – provides this analysis with an obvious starting point. Anticommunism, needless to say, has been very powerful in the postwar decades, and non-communist parties have taken great pains to keep it alive and to reinforce it – not least because it locked them into government by providing one of the structuring elements of Italian politics, the so-called ‘*conventio ad excludendum*’ (Pertici 2003; Mariuzzo 2010). This sentiment could by no means disappear overnight. Furthermore, Berlusconi could reinforce that ‘historical’ hostility by pointing out how the 1992–94 crisis had risked leading to the electoral triumph of the post-communist Partito Democratico della Sinistra (PDS), an outcome that he declared both paradoxical and unfair. Paradoxical because it meant that ‘the Berlin Wall had fallen on the

heads of the winners rather than on the losers'. And unfair because, although the politically selective magistrates had spared them, the communists had not only fully partaken in the corruption, they had actually caused it: 'The relationship between politics and business degenerated because the democratic parties had to face an anti-system party such as the PCI (Partito Comunista Italiano), that could count on the financial support of Moscow' (Berlusconi 2000, 79–81).

These backward-looking elements of Berlusconi's anticommunism – looking back at both the postwar decades and the more recent past of 1992–94 – were complemented by at least three present-oriented ones. In his rhetoric, in the first place, the end of *communism* had not brought about the end of *the communists*. The denunciation of the psychological inertia by which his opponents, coming from the ranks of the PCI, had preserved a quasi-totalitarian mentality even in post-totalitarian times, is a constant presence in Berlusconi's speeches. Here I shall provide just two examples from the great many that abound. The first comes from his famous 'L'Italia è il paese che amo' speech, announcing his decision to embark on a political career on 26 January 1994: 'Our Left claim that they have changed. They say that they have become liberal-democratic. But this is not true. Their men are the same as always, their mentality, their culture, their deepest beliefs, their behavior have remained the same' (Berlusconi 2000, 289–292). The second excerpt is taken from the opening speech to the first congress of his Forza Italia party, in April 1998:

Today the post-communists – that tragic illusion [communism] having failed – don't want to change man anymore, but they want to control society nonetheless and struggle to free themselves from certain methods that are intrinsic to that ideology: the systematic and continuous discrediting – more: the demonizing of their political opponents – the use of political justice to fight and, if possible, get rid of their political opponents [applause], the desire to create a power system that would be difficult to overturn. (Berlusconi 2000, 42–44)

Arguments about communist diversity are a bilateral feature of Italian political history: communists stressing it as altogether positive, anticommunists as entirely negative. Also, attributing a quasi-anthropological nature to that diversity is not new. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, anticommunist journalist and cartoonist Giovannino Guareschi famously drew the communists with three nostrils, so as to set them even physically apart from the rest of humanity.<sup>2</sup> After 1994, Berlusconi disembedded that argument from its historical and ideological context, transforming the quasi-anthropological diversity into a collective biographical feature of the post-communists capable of surviving the collapse of the Soviet Union. In Berlusconi's rhetoric, the post-communist 'totalitarian mentality', although obviously political in origin, is so deep and resilient that it becomes ethically relevant. The arrogance and hunger for power of the post-communists make them break the rules of ordinary morality. In particular, Berlusconi uses the word 'menzogna' ('a lie') more than once: post-communists lie, above all, when it comes to discrediting their opponents. The positive diversity is thus not only

denied, but overturned: 'We don't recognize your moral superiority at all. You are by no means the different, pure, best part of the country, as you still try to make people believe' (Berlusconi 2000, 94–98).

Here we encounter one of the many paradoxes of Berlusconiism. Berlusconi argued that Italy is an overly factious country and that the intensity of political strife and partisanship should be lowered. His speeches exposed excessive political divergences, such as those nurtured by twentieth-century ideologies, as artificial, harmful, and a mortal danger to the 'natural' sociability of human beings. This view of how politics should be provided Berlusconi with one of its main delegitimizing tools. By denouncing their mentality, despite the collapse of their ideology, it accused the post-communists of radicalizing political divisions and promoting hatred against their opponents. Berlusconi's anticommunist rhetoric was shaped in a defensive form and aimed at presenting him as a victim. Whatever its objective truthfulness, and the subjective sincerity of the rhetorician, however, it ended up enhancing factiousness and embittering the political struggle. A plea for a less intense partisanship turned into a dramatic intensifier of partisanship.

Two further present-oriented components of Berlusconi's anticommunism were direct consequences of two key features of his more general discourse. Beside the lessening of strife and partisanship, his proposal for a complete overhaul of Italian politics – its protagonists, instruments, aims, dimensions, boundaries – also entailed rolling back the state, according to Thatcher and Reagan's examples, and replacing professional politicians with people who had demonstrated their worth outside the political field, people 'with direct experience of life and its hardships rather than of the machinations of "backroom politics"' (Berlusconi 2001, 33–34). Post-communists, according to Berlusconi, fared pretty badly on both accounts. Only someone with significant entrepreneurial experience such as himself could radically reorganize the state, he said in 2000 during the campaign for the regional elections. Whereas '[t]he comrades of the Left, who have grown up in the chicken coops of political secretariats, can do other things: lying, insulting, canvassing; they are power- and money-hungry, but they do not even know where to start, to make such a project [as his] come true!' (Berlusconi 2004, 25). 'How can you trust people that have done nothing but politics their whole life?' he asked in 2005. 'They are political jobbers, they have no other expertise, they do politics for a living – possibly for a good living. In fact, they want to live even better, wielding power for power's sake' (Berlusconi 2006, 107).

Post-communists, moreover, wanted to give the state more power and resources, and make it ever more intrusive into the lives of Italians. 'For the Sirs of the left', Berlusconi said in 1998, 'the State must get everywhere, must occupy everything, must control everything, be informed on everything, know everything, rule everything. This is the State as a big brother – or rather, this is the State as a master' (Berlusconi 2000, 194). One year later he added:

Their credo is centralism, dirigism, statism, the opposite of ours, which is subsidiarity ... from this credo of theirs you get the idea of a State which does everything, which controls everything, the professor state, the doctor state, the teacher state. It is a state which is the exact opposite of what we think: our state only looks after essential services, and does it properly, and gives its citizens total freedom to look after the rest. (Berlusconi 2000, 83)

This 'idolatry of the state', in Berlusconi's rhetoric, was naturally connected with the quasi-totalitarian mentality of the post-communists. Building bigger and more pervasive public institutions was instrumental to gaining an ever-tighter grip on individuals, society, and the economy. 'This will surely not be a regime like those that deploy tanks in the streets and have people wear red or black or green shirts; it is a regime in disguise, plush-lined, white-gloved, which can also offer protection and privileges – yet expects subalternity and conformism' (Berlusconi 2001, 271). Fear not, however: 'We go back home aware that no government can govern against us, against the Italy that works and produces, the thrifty Italy, patient, tolerant and responsible – which, however, if provoked, if exasperated, could find herself obliged to face desperate times with adequate measures' (Berlusconi 2001, 263–264).<sup>3</sup>

### 3. Antifascism and antiberlusconism

Berlusconi's prominence within his own party and coalition makes drawing a thematic map of the discourses of the right aimed at delegitimizing the left relatively easy. However, since innumerable other subjects also contributed to those discourses – politicians, intellectuals, journalists, newspapers, TV shows – a full assessment of their historical impact would require more research. Antiberlusconism, as I said before, wells from an even greater number of sources, and there is no obvious solution to the problem of how to make a selection from among them, as the one provided by Berlusconi on the opposite side. Exploiting the degree of authorial arbitrariness that I am allowed, hopefully without abusing it, I have decided to focus on a number of politically engaged journalists and intellectuals who have written in the most actively antiberlusconian periodicals – *La Repubblica*, *L'Espresso*, *L'Unità*, *MicroMega* – and on some very prominent left-wing politicians. Once again, these sources are obviously insufficient for a proper history of antiberlusconism. Those journalists and intellectuals, for example, have at times been very critical of the left for its inadequate antiberlusconism – or rather, they directed their antiberlusconian arguments against parts of the left.<sup>4</sup> Their critiques give us a glimpse of a field of enquiry – the internecine quarrels within the left on how Berlusconi should be interpreted and fought – into which we cannot enter here. Our sources, however, provide a clear enough picture of the conceptual structure of antiberlusconism – and this is what this article is about.

Antiberlusconian discourse is composed of three threads that are logically distinct but, in practice, very closely intertwined: antifascism; the refusal of the 'spirit of the Eighties'; and moralism. Antiberlusconian intellectuals have repeatedly declared that Berlusconiism cannot be likened to fascism: 'Berlusconi's Italy is not fascism', as Paolo Flores d'Arcais, the editor of *MicroMega*, wrote in 2011; 'the "owner's dictatorship" of Cavalier Berlusconi is not the political dictatorship of Cavalier Mussolini' (Flores d'Arcais 2011, 5). At times, they disparagingly discard the accusation of making such a simplistic and historical comparison: 'only idiots would interpret those references [made in his previous articles] as meaning that the author sees Nazi features in the Berlusconi establishment', wrote Franco Cordero, a law professor and leading writer for *La Repubblica* (Cordero 2003, 41). Those disclaimers, however, are surrounded by innumerable metaphors, analogies, and parenthetical remarks that suggest the similarity of the two phenomena. Furthermore, they sometimes appear in books and essays that are explicitly aimed at comparing fascism and Berlusconiism. 'Would it be overly fanciful', as historian and antiberlusconian activist Paul Ginsborg wrote in 2003, drawing a dystopian scenario in which Berlusconi has introduced a presidential republic and been elected president, 'to imagine the "little Forzaitalians" going to bed in 2013 holding the Silvio B. medallion in their childish hands, as the little Balilla did with that of the Duce in 1935?' (Ginsborg 2003, 46).<sup>5</sup> Or, to take another example, this is how Umberto Eco replied to those who had criticized him for the antiberlusconian appeal that he had promoted a few weeks before the 2001 elections: 'This is a bizarre accusation, as though in their times the Rossellis, Gobetti, Salvemini, Gramsci, not to mention Matteotti (si parva licet componere magnis [if we may compare small things with great]), had been indicted for not being respectful and understanding enough of their opponent' (Eco 2006, 8–9).

Antifascist critiques of Berlusconiism have two sources. The first, and relatively less important, is provided by Berlusconi's readiness to strike alliances with parties that are connected to the fascist past, in one form or another, either because they come from that tradition and have forsaken it only belatedly and halfheartedly, as is the case of Alleanza Nazionale, or because they uphold quasi-fascist values, as the xenophobic Northern League, or because they have not even pretended to renounce – but actually proudly claim – their fascist past, as the Fiamma Tricolore with which the center-right coalition had an 'electoral pact of non-aggression' in some constituencies in 2001.<sup>6</sup> More often and with greater conviction, however, critics argue that Berlusconiism represents a kind of dictatorship fit for the twenty-first century, pursuing the same authoritarian aims as fascism, only with updated means. 'In our time', wrote Umberto Eco, 'if dictatorship must be, then it must be a mediatic and not a political dictatorship. For almost fifty years we have read that in our contemporary world ... you do not need to field rows of tanks to tear down a government, because occupying TV stations would be enough ... Now this theorem is demonstrated.' 'The mediatic regime', however, 'is even worse than fascism: under fascism people knew that



the media were controlled, and distrusted them; under Berlusconi they think that there is liberty, and they trust television' (Eco 2006, 137–139).

The two essential components of this argument – which is upheld by all those quoted in these pages – are, on the one hand, Berlusconi's control over the media, especially but not only television, and, on the other, his disregard for the democratic separation of powers, and his subsequent attempts to subordinate the judiciary to the executive and to concentrate all levers of government into his hands. 'The so-called House of Liberties [Berlusconi's coalition] must be voted down', said a manifesto promoted and signed by many renowned antiberlusconian intellectuals in 2001. 'This has nothing to do with Left and Right: democracy is at stake. Berlusconi ... has announced a law ... that would subordinate the judiciary to the political power, thereby destroying one of the pillars of the rule of law.'<sup>7</sup> 'Freedom of opinion in Italy exists only in theory', wrote novelist Antonio Tabucchi in *MicroMega*. 'In theory we are free to express our opinion. In practice, though, the real problem is: where? Berlusconi owns the quasi-totality of newspapers and the totality of TV news. With this, he controls us all' (Tabucchi 2003). As early as 1994, Flores d'Arcais effectively summarized the arguments that would be repeated for almost two decades in a substantially unchanged form:

bridle for the magistrates, gag for the journalists, diktats for the Bank of Italy, censorship against those who oppose the mafia in writings or films ... straitjacket for the trade unions, friendly advice for the entrepreneurs, raps on the knuckles for self-styled 'intellectuals' – and soap operas for all. A soft Peronism, if you will, but neither less disquieting, nor less devastating for a Western democracy. (Flores d'Arcais 2006, 83)

In the antiberlusconian discourse, reconnecting Berlusconi with the 1980s is, in the first place, instrumental to denying its novelty. After the events of 1992–94, continuity and discontinuity with the 'ancien regime' have become powerful political arguments. Berlusconi's claim that he will create a political class of non-professional politicians and his accusation that his opponents are party apparatchiki are rich in 'new vs. old' overtones. The antiberlusconian reply consists of pointing out that Berlusconi's success as an entrepreneur is largely, if not entirely, due to his fraternal relationship with those political parties that the magistrates demonstrated to be rotten to the marrow – Bettino Craxi's Partito Socialista Italiano (PSI), in particular – and that those who have voted for him since 1994 are the very same people who had kept the Christian Democrats and socialists in power in the 1980s. Once Berlusconi's rhetoric of novelty had been unveiled, the antiberlusconians could then move one step further: not only is there an absolute continuity, but it is an absolutely negative continuity. The Italian 1980s, in the antiberlusconian interpretation, were an utterly negative decade because it witnessed the degeneration of the party system, a dramatic increase in corruption, disregard for legality, the ruthless political colonization of the institutions, and the subordination of the public interest to private ends.

But the Western 1980s had been a negative decade too, a *decennium horribile* characterized by individualism, selfishness, hedonism, superficiality, acquisitiveness, the withering away of civic solidarity, the rolling back of politics, and the hegemony of the market economy.

Antiberlusconism connects national and transnational dynamics, and interprets Berlusconism as the poisoned and poisonous outcome of both the global *Zeitgeist* and its Italian manifestations. Achille Occhetto, general secretary of the PCI and then PDS from 1988 until 1994, made extensive use of these arguments in his 1994 book *Il sentimento e la ragione*. The communists' opposition to Craxi, wrote Occhetto, stemmed from their rejection of a 'greedy and rampant system' where the 'unscrupulous use of politics to enrich oneself and to increase one's power was considered the founding bloc of secularization, of a reckless, thoughtless and arrogant modernity' (Occhetto with Bartoli 1994, 14). Berlusconi has changed the forms but not the substance of that system. Even worse, he has placed the 'doppio Stato' – the web of covert, undemocratic, and illicit power relations that have supposedly conditioned the life of the Italian Republic for decades – formally in charge of the public institutions. As a consequence, the subversive right that he leads and his 'telecracy' should be considered a danger to democracy, and fought accordingly (Occhetto with Bartoli 1994, 48–49 and 172–173). Occhetto's successor as secretary general of the PDS, Massimo D'Alema, has often been criticized by radical antiberlusconians for his political realism and lukewarm antiberlusconism. Yet some of the arguments of his 1995 book *Un paese normale*, although expressed in a different tone, are not so unlike Occhetto's.<sup>8</sup>

The antifascist and 'anti-Eighties-ist' threads of antiberlusconism are both inextricable from the third thread that I mentioned earlier: moralism. It is impossible to give a full account of the moralistic overtones of the pre-1994 antifascist tradition here. Suffice to say that important currents of that tradition have tended – and still tend – to de-historicize fascism and to interpret it as the combination of all the defects of the Italians: conformism, intolerance, the tendency to be arrogant with the weak and servile with the strong, the inability to abide by the rules, the lack of a sense of the state and the common good, the constant search for shortcuts. Thus defined, fascism cannot be rejected as a mere political evil: it is morally unacceptable; those who espouse it, or ally with it, or even do not fight it with sufficient conviction are ethically flawed; and only by struggling against it with all their strength will Italians finally overcome their historical weaknesses and, like Pinocchio, turn from marionettes into real humans.<sup>9</sup> The historical sequence '1980s-Tangentopoli-Berlusconi' provides this form of antifascism with an ideal narrative of corruption, renovation, and delusion. The 1980s, as we saw earlier, are interpreted as the moment when the global *Zeitgeist* helped to unleash the unethical, 'animal spirits' individualism of the Italians, that the previous twenty years had labored to keep under control. Tangentopoli is praised as a reaction to the excesses of that decade, a unique

opportunity to extricate Italy from its flawed history and to finally set it morally straight. And Berlusconi is condemned as the reaction to the reaction, the return of the 'Gattopardo' (Scalfari 2004, 1012–1014), that is to say, as representing the quintessence of the ethical shortcomings of the Italians.

Berlusconi's biography and rhetoric are framed within this narrative: an unscrupulous entrepreneur who piled up a fortune by dubious means and has, first as a tycoon, been selling coarse entertainment and consumerist dreams to the Italians; and then, as a politician, their sacred right to mind their own business, disregard the public interest, break the rules and evade taxes.<sup>10</sup> Berlusconi's electorate is framed within this narrative too. In his 2001 appeal, which had a relevant impact, Umberto Eco provided the clearest possible antiberlusconian picture of Berlusconi voters. They are either 'motivated', that is to say, by no means stupid, but fascist or xenophobic, or exclusively interested in safeguarding their own privileges and in the possibility of disregarding laws. Or they are 'entranced' – these are the greatest number, people who do not entertain any political opinion and do not read newspapers (let alone books), and are stupefied by the dream of easy material well-being that television (Berlusconi's television) has been advertising for years. Given those premises, the 2001 elections should not be seen as an ordinary occurrence: 'Against the introduction of a de facto regime, against the showbiz ideology, to safeguard media pluralism in our country, we consider the coming elections as a Moral Referendum that nobody has a right to ignore' (Eco 2006, 113–117).

Moralism is almost ubiquitous in antiberlusconian discourse; endless quotations could be provided. It is not uncommon in the writings of politicians too. Achille Occhetto's 1994 book frequently refers to an ethical cleavage separating the communists from both Craxi's socialists, and more generally the pre-1992 governing parties, and the post-1994 right-wing forces. D'Alema (1995, 25; D'Alema with Caldarola 2013, 35) is convinced that Berlusconi expresses the ethically more objectionable components of the Italian character: lack of civic spirit, selfishness, particularism, clientelism. D'Alema's successor as PDS secretary general, Walter Veltroni, underlined the 'morality' of Prodi's 1996 government, as opposed to the disasters of Berlusconi's first cabinet, even though he modestly wrote the word morality in inverted commas (Veltroni 2000, 49). Romano Prodi himself – and to an even greater extent than Occhetto, D'Alema, and Veltroni – makes extensive use of the language of ethics in order to separate the left from the right. Berlusconi, he argues, means unquestioning veneration for material success, a predatory attitude towards public institutions, utter disregard for rules and laws, individualism and selfishness, lack of civic spirit and a sense of community. Forza Italia voters are 'those who double-park', that is, break the rules to solve their own problems, to the detriment of everyone else. In sum, Prodi said in 2006, 'The moral issue unifies the whole centre-left coalition' (Prodi with Colombo 2006, 64–79; Prodi 2006, 141–144; see also Prodi with Damilano 2015, 82).

The sense of moral superiority – anthropological extraneousness, even – that leads antiberlusconians to deny ethical citizenship to both Berlusconi and those who vote for it, was thoroughly analyzed in 2005 by sociologist Luca Ricolfi, himself coming from the tradition of the reformist left, in an essay significantly entitled *Perché siamo antipatici?* (Why are we unbearable?). Ricolfi identifies four ‘diseases’ of the Italian left: three are related to the problematic relationship between language and reality; the fourth is the sense of ethical superiority. According to that narrative, wrote Ricolfi, the left is peopled by altruists upholding ideas, whereas right-wing voters are egoists defending interests. This scheme leads to the Manichean identification of ‘two Italies’, one altogether good, the other altogether evil, in perennial struggle against each other; to the conviction that the country’s past, poisoned as it is by the predominance of the ‘dark side’, is the subject matter for a dismal story of failure and corruption; and to left-wing politicians and intellectuals presenting themselves as the saviors of the Peninsula (Ricolfi 2008, 82 ff).

Francesco Piccolo’s novel *Il desiderio di essere come tutti*, first published in 2013 by Einaudi and winner in 2014 of the *Premio Strega*, Italy’s most important literary prize, is an autobiographical analysis (and an *autodafé*, although self-indulgent) of the culture of the Italian left. It can be considered a sort of literary version of Ricolfi’s book. Among the many stories told by Piccolo, one is particularly interesting for us here: his ‘undercover’ participation in a political skiing holiday organized by Alleanza Nazionale, Berlusconi’s post-fascist ally, in order to write an article for the left-wing weekly magazine *Il Diario*. At the end of the tale, the author considers his moral attitude in faking political ideas that he did not have:

In substance, I cheated. In full conscience. I faked being someone that I was not. I easily abused the good faith of everybody ... There was so evident a form of contempt, so evident a form of racism in what I had done, that neutralized the effectiveness of my reporting. It placed myself and my readers in a position of moral superiority towards human beings that we considered different from ourselves, and that as a consequence we deemed could (should) undergo that violence ... The moral superiority had penetrated inside me in those Berlusconi years and made me impervious to sensitivity and respect for people who were different from myself. Because, somehow, I despised them, with a solid and unshakeable prejudice ... Given that they were fascists, I was authorized to be dishonest with them. It was this that made me feel uneasy, when I realized it. But this is the position that we all held, for twenty years, with the world that we did not like. (Piccolo 2015, 207–210)<sup>11</sup>

In describing Berlusconi anticommunism, I have highlighted one of its paradoxes: Berlusconi argued that factiousness should be lessened; he continuously accused his opponents of being pathologically factious; and, with his accusations, he contributed to enhancing and embittering the very same factiousness that he was criticizing. A similar paradox characterizes anti-Berlusconi: that of a surfeit of moralism and sense of ethical superiority

leading to immoral (and politically self-damaging) behavior. Antiberlusconian indictments of the Berlusconi electorate, furthermore, are tautological. The demonstration that those who vote for Berlusconi are immoral is granted by their voting for Berlusconi (see, for instance, Scalfari 2004, 1037). Yet those who have analyzed existing data on the Italian electorate have shown that, while left- and right-wing voters since 1994 have certainly exhibited different characteristics, even with regard to ethics, these differences do not allow for a Manichean distinction between the good and evil parts of Italian society (Ricolfi 2002; Orsina 2014, ch. 4).

All the antiberlusconian arguments described in this section are extensively developed in the writings of Eugenio Scalfari, founder of *La Repubblica* in 1976, its editor until 1996, and one of its leading writers thereafter. Moreover, those arguments were already clearly visible, and took on the final shape that they would keep for two decades, in late 1993 and early 1994, that is, before Berlusconi even announced his *discesa in campo* (entry into politics), and in the very first months of his political adventure. The argument that Scalfari represents the 'proto-antiberlusconism', that he set the standard and drew the lines for all subsequent antiberlusconian discourses, can be advanced here only as a hypothesis and suggestion for further research.

The left–right cleavage, according to Scalfari, is much more than a 'simple' political mirror of legitimate social interests; it is a profound division relating to the quality of democracy – if not its very survival – and has a lot to do with morality. The predominance, in the history of the Italian Republic, of a formally divided but substantially unified center-right party safeguarding conservative interests has led to the consolidation of a deeply dysfunctional and corrupt system: a lack of separation between public and private interests, disregard for market rules, waste of public money, tolerance of tax evasion (Scalfari 2004, 946, 3 October 1993). The system further degenerated in the 1980s, when 'consumerism and the rampant spirit of success as an end and corruption as a means' dominated Italy culturally, and Andreotti and Craxi politically (Scalfari 2004, 1032, 27 March 1994). Scalfari's assessment of this regime is unequivocal. For decades, and notably in the 1980s, Italy has been governed by 'a gang', a 'criminal association', a 'mafia Commission', mostly composed of some currents of the Democrazia Cristiana (DC) – *dorotei*, *andreottiani*, and Forze Nuove – and by Craxi's socialist party, with the marginal participation of the communists (Scalfari 2004, 853–855, 11 February 1993; and 856–857, 17 February 1993).

The collapse of the system in 1992–93 opened up an extraordinary opportunity for cleansing and renewal, yet it was also fraught with dangers. The deep undercurrents of Italian history were far from spent. Scalfari detected their resurfacing in the local elections of November 1993, which witnessed a dramatic increase in votes for the Lega Nord in the north and the neofascist Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI) in central and southern Italy. Once again, Scalfari's indictment of the 'reactionary electorate' that the collapse of the DC had pushed towards MSI

and Lega was ethical more than political: the vote stemmed from ‘a reaction of obtuse defense of sectional interests, a refusal to undertake general and national responsibilities, a withdrawal into egoism and prejudice’; the desire to preserve ‘miserable privileges, miserable prejudices, sectional interests in obvious conflict with collective ones and, lastly, a generous amount of illegality’ (Scalfari 2004, 971, 23 November 1993; and 973–974, 28 November 1993; see also 974–976, 4 December 1993). Conversely, the support that, in those elections, Scalfari granted to the ‘Grand Alliance’ between ‘civil society and the reformed and reformist Left’ is argued in more than purely political terms: ‘Efficiency and social solidarity have come together; public morality has met with competence, good government with the defense of the general interest’ (977, 7 December 1993).

Berlusconi’s public endorsement for MSI leader Gianfranco Fini, who was then running for mayor in Rome, allowed the editor of *La Repubblica* to add him to the picture. In mid-December 1993, a mere fortnight later, when rumors about Berlusconi’s intention to run in the coming general election grew stronger, he became one of the protagonists of Scalfari’s editorials. The newcomer was seamlessly woven into the existing discursive canvas: Berlusconi was ‘the most genuine fruit of this regime that has foundered in the mud’ (Scalfari 2004, 984, 19 December 1993); there was nothing in him of the ‘hopes, needs, torments, ideals and even dreams that are the fabric of noble politics’ (1005, 27 January 1994); he represented a new right whose chief features were ‘disdain for rules, a manifest will to continue to disdain and disregard them, herd behavior, the mythology of the Chief, hatred towards the “other”, abuse of the weak, demagoguery as a method, an obvious and paraded Peronism’ (1011, 7 February 1994). All this in a country where the right had been subversive since the times of Catiline, that is, the first century BC (1026–1027, 13 March 1994). Berlusconi is a *gattopardo* loved by Italians who ‘adore fortune, adore the possibility to climb without effort and adore those who promise them that effortless climbing and who represent its realization’ (1014, 13 February 1994); he is a charlatan ‘whose likes I had never encountered’ (1031, 26 March 1994); his electoral victory is easily explained by the Italian desire ‘to ride on a ground that is free of obstacles and ruled as little as possible’ – a desire demonstrating that ‘Tangentopoli happened in vain, and it was foolish to believe that the prosecutors could found a moral in a country that has never had one’ (1035, 30 March 1994; and 1037, 3 April 1994). Last but not least, Berlusconi carries with him the ‘danger of totalitarian power’: not fascism, of course, ‘but there are other ways and means to undermine the consciences and homogenize the differences. Ways and means that are even more persuasive, more insidious, more dangerous’ (1043, 17 April 1994). After this barrage, Scalfari’s assertion that ‘[t]he editorship of this newspaper has taken the entirely autonomous decision to abstain from any prejudice against the right-wing government’ (1046, 24 April 1994) sounds quite hilarious.

Scalfari’s antiberlusconism is so precocious also because it has its roots in the 1980s. The reciprocal hostility between the editor of *La Repubblica* and

the socialist leader Bettino Craxi stemmed from their different and competing political designs for solving the communist question and building a left-wing alternative to the DC party: to put it simply, a social-democratic strategy for Craxi, according to which the socialists should hegemonize if not swallow up the communists, as in France; and a radical one for Scalfari, aimed at the liberal and democratic 're-education' of the PCI. In a decade of such fast-moving and little-governed modernization as the 1980s, the media, especially television, were one of the most relevant battlefields in which that hostility emerged, as Franco Debenedetti and Antonio Pilati explain in *La guerra dei trent'anni*, the best analysis to date of the entangled political and mediatic struggles of the last thirty years (Debenedetti and Pilati 2009). This is how Berlusconi became part of the conflict, notably with the decree-laws issued by Craxi's government in 1984 and 1985 to overrule the judicial block of Mediaset broadcasts. Berlusconi and Scalfari then clashed directly at the end of the decade, in the so-called 'war of Segrate', a business conflict over the historic Italian publisher Mondadori that almost led to Berlusconi acquiring ownership of *La Repubblica*.<sup>12</sup> The decade came to an end in 1990 with the passing of the Mammi law on broadcasting, which was criticized for its subservience to Berlusconi's interests and led to the resignation of five ministers belonging to the left of the DC party. Ascertaining when and how exactly Scalfari introduced moral arguments in this conflict, and how this was connected to the similar arguments that the PCI was using in that decade (Mancina 2014; Guiso 2017), is beyond the scope of this article, and could be subject matter for further research.

#### 4. Conclusion: the boundaries of the political

In the first four postwar decades, the behavior of Italian voters was conditioned more by the political tradition of their neighborhood – their subculture – than their socio-economic status. The 1992–94 crisis changed that, leading to the emergence of a socio-economic cleavage in politics. Since Tangentopoli, the self-employed have mostly voted for Berlusconi, and public sector workers mostly against him, while private sector workers have shown less clear-cut allegiances and greater electoral volatility. From the 1960s through to the 1980s, inflation first and then public debt had helped reconcile diverging socio-economic interests. When those 'reconciling instruments' ceased being available, the divergences became politically relevant (Bellucci 1997; Itanes 2006a, 98, table 6.2). Clashes of interests provide the most classical substance of the left–right cleavage, and by themselves do not necessarily generate pathological processes of reciprocal delegitimation such as those of Berlusconi's Italy. If the politicization of socio-economic conflicts in post-1994 Italy was so intense, this is partly due to the fact that the belated emergence of those conflicts raised their stakes. After 1994, the self-employed and public sector workers were not just battling over the resources of the present and future, but those of the past as

well: who should repay the huge public debt that had piled up in the previous decades – the private sector with higher taxes, or the public sector becoming leaner and more efficient? Another part of the explanation for the intensity of political strife in Berlusconi's Italy, however, must be sought elsewhere, in the conditioned reflexes bred by Italy's Cold War past, and in the effects of Tangentopoli.

In his propaganda, as we saw in section 2, Berlusconi 'embedded' his reading of the socio-economic clash in the anticommunist tradition, connecting the statism of the post-communists with their 'quasi-totalitarian' mentality. Framed within that discourse, the insistence of the Italian left on the defense of the state, its resources and scope was exposed as much more than a simple political error; it was presented as a threat to the liberties of Italian citizens. Berlusconi's expulsion of his political opponents from the field of liberal democracy by pushing them far to the left was matched by his opponents driving him from that very same field by pushing him far to the right. Antiberlusconian propaganda presented Berlusconi's arguments that the state should be rolled back, taxes cut, and the market freed not as merely mistaken, but as unconstitutional and a lethal danger to Italian democracy, precariously poised as it was on a brittle civic culture. Furthermore, as we saw in section 3, antiberlusconians used a number of other arguments, many of them reproducing or updating the antifascist tradition, to demonstrate that Berlusconi was incompatible with democracy: his control of the mass media; his impatience with the separation of powers and attempts to put the judiciary under political tutelage; his populist desire to establish a direct link with the masses thanks to television and demagoguery.

These delegitimizing mechanisms were, so to speak, Janus-faced. One of their faces looked backwards, to the clashes on the contents and organization of the political that had been typical of the mid-twentieth century: the conflicts on democracy, liberalism, fascism, and communism. The other face looked forwards, to the struggle over the boundaries of the political, above all vis-à-vis the market, that had broken out especially in the Anglo-Saxon world in the 1980s. The crisis of the political that Tangentopoli opened up in 1992–94, however, was far deeper than anything experienced in the USA or UK in the previous decade. The two halves of Italy's post-1994 'imperfect bipolarism' put forward two very different hypotheses for getting out of that crisis. Their opposing ways to rethink the political provided both groups with powerful instruments of reciprocal delegitimation.

Faced with the crisis of the political, Berlusconi proposed to roll it back. It was a simple – nay, simplistic – proposal. In words, at least, it was much more consistent than most scholars have been ready to admit, and its simplicity and consistency provide a partial explanation for its success. Tilting the balance between state and market in favor of the latter was one component of the program. At least four other components ensued: the intensity of political strife should cool down – we have already highlighted the internal contradiction of



this part of Berlusconi's rhetoric in section 2; Italian politics ought to be dramatically simplified by 'flooding' it with common-sensical, man-in-the-street practices and language; Italian democracy must be simplified by making the decision-making process faster, more effective, and more immediately respectful of the will of the people; a new political class coming out of the professions and the entrepreneurial class was to guarantee the rolling back of the political at all levels, the partial denial of its autonomy, and its subordination to managerial logics. Although it was not paramount, moralism was also part of the project, as this quotation shows:

That is why we liberals, unlike the antiliberals, do not think that the market is based on individual selfishness ... And we continue to say this and say it openly: if only there were the same morality in politics that there is in the market; when we say that we are the standard bearers of a new morality in politics, it means that we are standard bearers of a morality that we have learned in the market, and that is absent in politics, where we would like to introduce it. (Berlusconi 2000, 116)

Starting from these premises, Berlusconi delegitimized his opponents by emphasizing their excessively political nature: they were children of the twentieth century; self-serving professional politicians who poisoned the public space with their ideologies; leftovers of a system that had suffocated and paralyzed the country's extraordinary social energies first, and then miserably failed.

Faced with the crisis of the political, the post-1994 left drew a sharp distinction between good and bad politics and proposed not *less*, but *better* politics as an answer to the 'Italian question'. Berlusconi was delegitimized as an example of bad politics and the true heir to the failed parties of the 1980s, but also as a non-politician who denied politics autonomy and nobility, and reaped consensus with non-political means. This is one of the reasons it took so long to realize that there was political substance in Berlusconiism – the reason, for instance, why Berlusconi's anticommunism has been subject matter for irony more than serious analysis.

The way out of the crisis of the political proposed by the left was less straightforward than Berlusconi's, and it was made even less straightforward by the fragmented and quarrelsome nature of the alliance that advanced it. Furthermore, it was plagued by a significant historical contradiction. Although Enrico Berlinguer's PCI had begun to wield the 'moral question' as a political weapon at the end of the 1970s, that question forcefully invaded and conquered the political space only in 1992–94, and mostly thanks to the magistrates. Tangentopoli could be presented as the moment when good politics had finally defeated bad politics, and the post-1994 left-wing alliance as the heir to the good pre-1992 politicians. Yet there was no denying that the victory of good over bad politics had not been achieved politically, that is, in an election, but by judicial means. By maintaining that the solution to the failed politics of the past was the good politics that had not been effective enough to assert itself politically, therefore, the antiberlusconians were de facto subordinating the political to the ethical,

and giving the judiciary the power to tell good from bad – that is, moral from immoral – politics, in the very same moment when they defended the nobility and autonomy of politics.

This contradiction is clearly visible in Massimo D'Alema's writings. Building on his realism and 'politique d'abord' approach, in his 1995 book *Un paese normale*, D'Alema emphasized the need to grant political recognition to the Berlusconi alliance and its voters, and for a reciprocal legitimation of left and right:

If 43–45 percent of Italians vote today for parties whose language we cannot understand, or that we even consider dangerous for their way of reasoning, over time this can open up a major rift in the national conscience. This is the reason why we are endeavoring to understand that reality, to communicate directly with it. A Left that is unwilling, a priori, to understand the other half of the country, is not a mature one. Starting with the decision to speak the same language when it comes to setting the rules, asking for a common taking on of responsibility. (D'Alema 1995, 41)

Yet D'Alema used a Manichean and moralistic language too, as we noticed in section 3. And his plea for dialogue and understanding is not easily reconciled with his repeatedly expressed conviction that Berlusconi represents the most unethical components of the Italian national character and Italian society.

This line of argument may seem abstract, but those who have observed the Italian left since 1994 will easily detect the real political consequences of the unresolved tension between the political, the ethical, and the legal: internecine quarrels and uncertainty as to whether politics should regain some control of the judiciary, and how; the most extreme left-wing groups delegitimizing the moderate and 'political' ones for their insufficient moral radicalism – and morality; repeated accusations of hypocrisy to the left for not being up to the ethical standards that they themselves had set; insistence on moralistic antiberlusconism as the only instrument that could keep together an otherwise politically dissonant alliance. That is to say, a dependence on Berlusconi that was clear to all voters (Damilano 2013; Cerasa 2014).

## Notes

1. Among the latest available studies, see Colarizi and Gervasoni (2012); Italia contemporanea (2014); *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* (2015); *Modern Italy* (2015).
2. Communist women were drawn with three breasts as well. Guareschi's cartoons can be seen at <http://www.fondazionemonadori.it/collezioneminardi/percorsi/cose/1/elenco/1.html> (accessed 2 June 2015).
3. For a more extended analysis of Berlusconi's ideology and rhetoric, with a less specific focus on his anticommunism, see Orsina (2014, ch. 3).
4. See, for instance, the title of the 2006 book by Paolo Flores d'Arcais, notably the bracketed part: *Il ventennio populista. Da Craxi a Berlusconi (passando per D'Alema?)*.

5. This essay is published in Santomassimo (2003), significantly entitled *La notte della democrazia italiana. Dal regime fascista al governo Berlusconi*. In the introduction of the book (9–12), the editor states: ‘All the authors of this book ... are fully aware of the fact that we are not facing a regime of a fascist kind’. In his essay, after the sentence that we have quoted above, Ginsborg also underlines the many differences between Mussolini and Berlusconi. The 2011 article by Flores d’Arcais quoted earlier is published in a special issue of *MicroMega* that is entitled “Berlusconismo e fascismo”.
6. See, for instance, Colombo and Padellaro (2002, 42 and 75); Tranfaglia (2004, 78); Flores d’Arcais (2006, 103–106). In 2001, Paolo Sylos Labini and Alessandro Galante Garrone wrote an open letter to President of the Republic Carlo Azeglio Ciampi about Berlusconi’s electoral agreement with Fiamma Tricolore. See excerpts of the letter at <http://www.ildialogo.org/elezioni/fermareladestra2.htm> (accessed 2 June 2015). On this, see also Tabucchi (2001).
7. The appeal was promoted by Norberto Bobbio, Alessandro Galante Garrone, Alessandro Pizzorusso, and Paolo Sylos Labini. Among those who signed it were Paolo Flores d’Arcais and *MicroMega*, Roberto Benigni, Andrea Camilleri, Rita Levi Montalcini, and Antonio Tabucchi. See the text at [http://www.ildialogo.org/elezioni/appello\\_democratici.htm](http://www.ildialogo.org/elezioni/appello_democratici.htm) (accessed 2 June 2015).
8. In the conclusions below, I shall devote some attention to D’Alema’s contradictions. I have mentioned only political sources here, but the negative continuity between the 1980s and Berlusconi is also a common feature of several antiberlusconian intellectuals I have quoted so far. See, for instance, the writings of Flores d’Arcais, Ginsborg, Sylos Labini (2006), and Tranfaglia.
9. This is the interpretation of fascism and antifascism espoused by many contributors in Santomassimo (2003). For an analysis of this interpretation, see Galli delle Loggia (2003).
10. Here we are concerned with Berlusconism, not Berlusconi. It goes without saying, though, that the antiberlusconian intellectuals considered here often refer to Berlusconi’s biography. The most successful antiberlusconian reconstruction of the origins of Berlusconi’s fortune is the one by Veltri and Travaglio (2001).
11. Another literary example of the anthropological extraneousness that antiberlusconians feel towards Berlusconians is provided in a short tale by novelist Lidia Ravera. The tale, significantly entitled *Montecchie Capuleti*, recounts the stormy erotic meeting between the very left-wing mother and the very right-wing father of two teenagers in love with each other. The almost incredible number of stereotypes that Ravera contrives to cram in just three pages makes the tale quite objectionable from a literary point of view, but very interesting for our analysis here. Moreover, the tale is published in a party book, *Liberare il futuro*, the 2005 almanac of the Democratici di Sinistra (Democratici di Sinistra 2005, 211–213).
12. The ‘war of Segrate’ had a very long and complex judicial process. After decisions had been overturned several times in the various degrees of judgment, Berlusconi’s lawyer Cesare Previti was finally condemned in 2006 for having corrupted one of the judges in the council of three that had taken one of the crucial decisions in the trial. In 2013, Berlusconi’s Fininvest was condemned to pay almost half a billion euros to its competitor in the ‘war’, Carlo De Benedetti’s Compagnie Industriali Riunite (CIR).

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