

Berlusconi Between Politics and Popular Culture

By

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Abstract

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In this dissertation I contextualize the political protagonism of Silvio Berlusconi with respect to important heroes of contemporary Italian popular culture. Comparing Berlusconi to the protagonists of Italy's dramatized television series and TV-movies, I consider the political and pop cultural significance of his behavior through Antonio Gramsci's theories of hegemony and the national popular. I locate Berlusconi's political connection to contemporary Italian popular culture by briefly contrasting it to past iterations of the politics-popular culture relationship in Italy and the United States, and to its likely future configurations in Italy.

My research shows that while Berlusconi is often a potent and educative symbol of a hegemonic, conservative national popular culture, he is also often at odds with important components of said culture. This finding adds nuance to most contemporary considerations of Berlusconi's power, which frequently posit his political and cultural influence as monolithic. Increasing social and cultural fragmentation in Italy suggests that the "Berlusconis" of the future will likewise embody a charismatic and spectacular form of politics, though they will be bereft of Berlusconi's wider political-cultural syncing, which, while never perfect, has nevertheless been the historically most significant facet of his influence.

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Preface

In this dissertation I analyze the political protagonism of Silvio Berlusconi. I do so by contrasting the performances of contemporary Italy's most powerful individual with those of the protagonists of Italy's most-consumed form of popular culture, its dramatized television series and TV-movies.¹ I contextualize the findings of my investigation with respect to Antonio Gramsci's theories of political and cultural power, and his thoughts on the relation between these fields. While "hegemony" is likely the first Gramscian concept that will come to the reader's mind in such a scenario, I have attempted to go beyond a strict examination and application of this term to my findings. While I discuss hegemony and its relationship to Berlusconi and contemporary Italian popular culture in the first and final chapters of this dissertation, I also dedicate substantial attention to other important aspects of Gramsci's thoughts. These include his concept of the national-popular, his thoughts on the connection between sexuality and the economy, and his reflections on education, broadly considered. As I discuss in my conclusion, these latter facets are all part of a wider hegemonic picture; my goal between my initial discussion of hegemony, in Chapter 1 of the dissertation, and my subsequent application of the concept to my findings, in Chapter 4, is to flesh out how these "strands" of hegemony in contemporary Italy operate; I feel that breaking up hegemony into these parts allows for a greater understanding of Berlusconi as a nexus between politics and popular culture in contemporary Italy.

Of course, such partitions are useful analytically, but potentially mystifying of the seamless operation of what has come to be described as "*berlusconismo*."² I accept this limitation, believing that some reflective distance, even if artificial, is useful to understand the Berlusconi phenomenon, though I do not believe an excessive cataloguing of what Berlusconi does is necessarily useful. Such is the overlap among the different aspects of Berlusconi, or

¹ I have not performed a detailed quantitative analysis to verify this claim. Still, with the most watched of these programs regularly reaching audiences of more than 10 million viewers, I believe the only comparable cultural items, in terms of quantitative consumption, might be Internet videos that can similarly receive tens of millions of "hits." The television programs I analyze still have more widespread cultural resonance in Italy, given their subsequent and partial "rielaboration" or other "recycling" (of their stories and/or of their stars) in affiliated media programs or platforms, such as reality or variety television programs and tabloid magazines. While this situation may gradually be changing, and Internet- or pay-TV-related material may come to eclipse the power of broadcast television programs such as those discussed here, in the period I analyze, 2000-2008, mainstream broadcast television was the most powerful media instrument in Italy, and the fictional programs that I analyze were no exception.

² As of late April 2014, a search in Google Scholar for "*berlusconismo*" yields approximately 1,100 results. It has not been possible to review the vast majority of this material. The most significant discussion of *berlusconismo*, for this dissertation, has been Paul Ginsborg and Enrica Asquer's edited volume *Berlusconismo: Analisi di un sistema di potere* (Rome: Laterza, 2011), discussed below. I have also benefited from reading, even if often in disagreement, Giovanni Orsina's apologist *Il berlusconismo nella storia d'Italia* (Venice: Marsilio, 2013). I have also examined Diego Giachetti's *Berlusconi e il berlusconismo* (Varese: Arterigere, 2010), though this text has not had a significant impact on my thoughts, even if I agree with its central premise that to understand the last thirty years in Italy it is important to focus not just on Berlusconi, but the wider aspects of Italian culture that have contributed to his success. The reader of this dissertation will note that several times I offer the quantitative data of a given search term in a database. This operation is meant neither as a nod to "digital humanities" nor as a substitute for qualitative examination of material; it serves, rather, to underline, very simply, the vast, and I would argue, unwieldy and ultimately unmasterable (at least in a total sense) nature of the scholarship on both Berlusconi and Gramsci.

“berlusconismo” (I discuss the latter in a moment), that ultimately a concentration on several fundamental aspects that seem to be useful abstractions of his various activities appears to be the most efficient way of understanding the power and potential systematicity of Berlusconi’s influence in Italy. Ironically, the best “synthesis” of “berlusconismo,” in the sense just indicated, is to be found in what might be considered a “cataloguing” operation, though this was clearly not the intent of the publication. Paul Ginsborg and Enrica Asquer’s edited volume, *Berlusconismo: analisi di un sistema di potere*, offers a fine survey of Berlusconi’s influence in various sectors of Italian society; its most useful contributions to the understanding of Berlusconi’s model of power (what they have in mind when they speak of *berlusconismo*), however, can be found in its fairly succinct outline of the central elements of *berlusconismo*, and particularly in its specific treatment of Berlusconi’s cultural operations, an important aspect of my consideration of the politician and media magnate.

Ginsborg and Asquer identify the key, constitutive aspects of *berlusconismo* in its patrimonial nature, particular cultural discourse (discussed below) ultimately misogynous framing of gender relations, cynical relationship with the Catholic Church, repeated discrediting of public institutions such as the Italian legal system, and its divisive mode of operation (along class, national, sexual lines). These facets are all useful for understanding Berlusconi and his model of power, but I feel Ginsborg and Asquer’s treatment of Berlusconi’s cultural operations most accurately, and efficiently, captures the spirit of both his political performances and wider cultural influence. The authors describe Berlusconi’s “*populismo culturale*” as a “*rappresentazione della realtà che seleziona aspetti parziali di essa, e li amplifica, li manipola, e li volgarizza.*”³ While this description is applicable to numerous examples of political populism and perhaps many examples of popular culture, I find it particularly apt to describe Berlusconi because it also underwrites two other important aspects of what Ginsborg and Asquer attribute to Berlusconi’s cultural model, namely a heroic narrative and an apparent, but false, erasure of borders between the producers of trends in aesthetics and ethics in contemporary Italian popular culture (Berlusconi and his associates at his various media outlets) and the consumers of such “products.”⁴

Berlusconi’s “heroics” and feigned proximity to average individuals are explained, at an abstract level, by Ginsborg and Asquer’s first framing: the selection, amplification, simplification

³ XIV; “representation that selects partial aspects of reality, amplifies them, manipulates them, and popularizes (or vulgarizes) them.”

⁴ Ginsborg and Asquer, V-XXIX. I discuss Berlusconi as a “hero” in greater detail throughout this dissertation, as discussed later in this preface. Such a heroic narrative is, of course, typical of most prominent leaders, and has been discussed in relation to Berlusconi from early in his political career. Among other scholars to approach this phenomenon, two notable contributions to understanding Berlusconi’s protagonism, political and cultural, are Emanuela Poli, “Silvio Berlusconi and the myth of the creative entrepreneur.” *Modern Italy* 3.2 (1998): 271-279, and Stephen Gundle, “The death (and re-birth) of the hero: Charisma and manufactured charisma in modern Italy.” *Modern Italy* 3.2 (1998): 173-189. This “heroic” narrativization of political leadership can be seen as a part of a wider mediatization and personalization of politics in Italy (and the West more generally), especially from the 1980s forward. A brief and comparative overview of the Italian case is given in Donatella Campus, “Mediatization and Personalization of Politics in Italy and France: The Cases of Berlusconi and Sarkozy.” *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 15.2 (2010): 219-235; Campus also discusses the construction of contemporary political leadership in Italy with respect to its American counterpart in her “Leaders, dreams and journeys: Italy’s new political communication.” *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 7, no. 2 (2002): 171-191. In his biography of Berlusconi, Giuseppe Fiore has also recounted several instances where Berlusconi has cast himself as a hero. *Il venditore: storia di Silvio Berlusconi e della Fininvest* (Milan: Garzanti Libri, 2004), 19-44; 131-137.

and subsequent narration of aspects of reality, which itself allows for the plausibility (among those that believe) of Berlusconi's heroic narratives and the apparent, but false, elision between the elite and the popular classes. Asquer describes this elision, in motion since Berlusconi began to consolidate his grip on commercial culture in Italy in the 1980s, as "progressively more 'popolaresque,' fakely popular, and in ultimate analysis, populist."⁵ This framing, which is applicable to both Berlusconi's political performances and his wider cultural apparatus, provides efficient perspective on the numerous examinations of Berlusconi's impact on contemporary Italy.

The overlap between politics and popular culture in Berlusconi is why I have chosen to contextualize my comparative research through Gramsci's analyses of these fields. That the connection between the two spheres has become increasingly important, in Italy, but elsewhere as well, with the media revolutions of the twentieth and twenty-first century, and concomitant increase in the importance of popular culture in daily experience in many areas of the world, is attested by the explosion in postwar Gramsci-inspired studies in Europe, North America, South America, and parts of Asia.

Because of this blending of politics and popular culture, in addition to the increasing importance of the mediated form of the latter in daily life experience, I assess how Berlusconi "the hero," in his own configuration, compares to both other political leaders and the protagonists of Italian popular culture, looking at both spheres' framing of their protagonists, and of the problems these protagonists must face. I have chosen the heroes of Italian television dramas and films as comparative figures to Berlusconi because, as privileged identities of "his" medium, television, they represent well-known figures that can be used as foils for understanding the exact nature of Berlusconi's protagonism on the Italian stage. While either fictional or dramatized versions of historical figures, these heroes are designed to attract attention, relate to audience members, and drive home messages that must resonate with viewers. These are the same qualities of successful politicians, including Berlusconi. By comparing Berlusconi to the heroes of Italian fictional television programs, then, we can begin to see what might be the relationship between Berlusconi's populism and Italian popular culture; examining the problems posed by the political and fictional spheres, we can better contextualize this relationship; using the vocabulary and perspective of Gramsci, we can attempt to theorize what the consequences of this relationship might be.

My study, and my findings, have similarities to Ginsborg and Asquer's work. My work differentiates itself, however, in that it delves deeper into the "heroic" nuances of Berlusconi and his counterparts in contemporary Italian popular culture. I see my study adding value in its contextualization of Berlusconi with respect to other "fictional" protagonists of Italian popular culture. Through comparison with both the Italian present and past, I draw out how typical Berlusconi is, or is not, in relation to other heroes of Italian popular culture. As I show, in certain instances Berlusconi is reminiscent of other protagonists — he saves the day, his talents are superior, and he looks out for the little guy. But in other ways, Berlusconi is anything but a typical hero. His emphasis on individualism, liberalism and consumption is not replicated in most of the fictional characters I examine, where if anything, a religious or secular concern for the general welfare (a more or, in the better cases, less, cliché "*buonismo*") seems to predominate. Berlusconi's frequent self-promotion is also absent from the televised heroes of my

⁵ "...sempre più popolaresca, fintamente popolare e, in un'ultima analisi, populista," 103. Enrica Asquer, "Popolare, popolaresco, populista." *Berlusconismo: Analisi di un sistema di potere* (Rome: Laterza, 2011), 102-19.

study, where humility and at times self-deprecation are the norm. Further, the fictional heroes of my study are mostly reluctant — they do not seek attention and are eager to return to the tranquility of “normal” lives; earlier in his career Berlusconi paid lip service to this idea, part of his “martyr” narrative, but it is clearly not an authentic framing of his persona. Berlusconi’s often misogynist treatment of women is also largely absent from my fictional protagonists’ behavior.

Texts

To explore Berlusconi’s positioning in Italian politics and popular culture through the lens of protagonists and their problems, I review a wide range of primary source material. The key primary texts of my study are the prominent pieces of Berlusconi’s election campaigns in 2000-2001, 2005-2006, and 2007-2008, and important fictional television programs from those same seasons, in addition to the important texts of Berlusconi’s respective political opponents. I focus on campaign years to better isolate, chronologically, the similarities and differences between the two groups of messages, and to better understand how each sphere interprets and narrativizes current events. I use material from non-campaign years when appropriate.

I have chosen the given fictional texts for analysis because they were the most heavily consumed examples of popular culture in Italy at the time, and because they emerge from a medium, television, that was not only the dominant political and cultural platform, but was, and still is, largely identified with Berlusconi himself. By comparing these respective political and fictional narratives, I locate Berlusconi “heroically” and “problematically.” I compare Berlusconi the “hero” to his fictional counterparts in Italian television, and compare the problems, or quests, he sets himself with those faced by his political and fictional counterparts.

The texts that I have selected are numerous because I hope that my study will be representative. I am aware, however, that my examination of relevant texts is not exhaustive. Frankly, I do not believe an exhaustive study of Berlusconi is presently possible; there is too much material to which scholars, journalists, and Berlusconi himself are constantly adding new insights and examples. Still, my texts were not selected randomly, and are important examples of their respective paradigms. The political texts and fictional programs of my dissertation represent an approximate equilibrium of three factors: viewership, importance, balance. While the specific nature of these factors is somewhat different for politics and fiction, respectively, they ultimately boil down to the following:

- “Viewership”—The available programs and political events with the largest average, or largest possible, audiences are analyzed;
- Importance—Programs and political events that are important either for the wider 2000-2008 period, or for the specific season considered, in at least one of two ways: notable presence in general Italian popular culture (i.e. people are aware of the text, talk about the text, etc.), and/or generally recognized by academic experts as having been important, are studied;
- Balance—Whenever possible, the political texts and the programs of my study represent a balance between different “genres” (i.e. television movie vs. series, political advertisement vs. campaign speech, etc.) and, in the case of televised fiction, public and private broadcasting (i.e. RAI vs. Mediaset).

Keeping the aforementioned background information in mind, below I map my exploration of Berlusconi's position between politics and popular culture through the four chapters of this dissertation.

Chapters

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the general contours and political-cultural significance of the three principal components of my study: Gramsci's theorizations of the relationship between culture and politics, both in general and with respect to the Italian case; Berlusconi's rhetoric, political and cultural, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s, the period that witnessed his accumulation and consolidation of cultural and political power before what I call his "middle period" (ranging from approximately 2000 to 2011), the arc of Berlusconi's career that is closely analyzed in this dissertation; and Italian televised fiction's historical development and fundamental characteristics, at least up to, and during, the period considered in this dissertation.

My first chapter also offers an extended explanation of my choice to compare seemingly dissimilar texts—Berlusconi's political rhetoric and the most important fictional or otherwise dramatized television programs, miniseries, and films. I justify my approach via the narrative similarities—diegetic and extradiegetic, that connect these two fields, noting, among other items, that in both areas "heroes," or protagonists, can be seen as condensations of wider political and cultural values, or legacies, and that such protagonists must face problems that themselves are distillations of the anxieties, hopes, and often stereotypes of contemporary Italy.

In Chapter 2 I compare the behavior of Berlusconi in the 2000-2001 election to that of his opponent, Francesco Rutelli, as well as that of the key fictional protagonists of the Italian television season. I then contextualize my findings in two ways: with respect to Gramsci's thoughts on Supermen and common sense, and in relation to past iterations of the politics-popular culture relationship in Italy.

Berlusconi portrayed himself as a type of superman in this election: a multi-talented, and recurring hero that could save Italy. In casting himself as such an exceptional figure, Berlusconi diverged from the heroic norm of 2000-2001 fictional protagonists. These figures, regardless of age or profession, were mostly characterized as humble, down-to-earth, apparently "normal" heroes, a description that could also be applied to Rutelli's self-portrayal. The fictional narratives, for the most part, utilized single protagonists, a traditional narrative model in Italian television, as opposed to "choral" protagonism, a model that was partially present in Rutelli's campaign.

I note that Berlusconi's "supermanism" is reminiscent of Gramsci's framing of the heroes of 19th century popular literature, a model that, in the Italian case, has also been seen, though in differing degrees, by other figures that straddled the divide between politics and culture, notably Garibaldi, Mussolini, and D'Annunzio. While Bettino Craxi can be seen as a type of "pre-Berlusconi" in regard to his dynamic and charismatic politics, Berlusconi is clearly the most significant case of a charismatic leader that bridges politics and culture in post-WWII Italy. Such "superman" politics complements the "othering" of problems that I see in both the political texts

and fictional television programs of my 2000-2001 sample. I argue that such simplistic “othering,” wherein responsibility for a given issue is rather mechanically forced onto external actors or forces, with no consideration of one’s own complicity in a given problem, is frequently reinforced in contemporary societies across both politics and culture. In other words, both “reality” and “fiction” work to enforce a type of ossified “common sense,” a concept dear to Gramsci because of the political consequences of these “taken for granted” notions. In the season in question, I describe how the “common sense” espoused towards State institutions and immigration in my political and cultural texts appears to favor an individualist, anti-State liberal ideology, such as that nominally promoted by Berlusconi.

In Chapter 3 I compare the protagonism of Berlusconi, his 2005-2006 opponent Romano Prodi, and the relevant fictional heroes of the television season. Those findings are again contextualized in a “double” framework: against Gramsci’s ideas on “the sexual question” and in relation to two other contemporary forms of popular culture in Italy, the tabloid and soccer press. I argue that the principal characteristics of the protagonists and problems of 2005-2006 were more scattered and less coherent than those of the 2000-2001 season, though the strongest concentrations of characteristics did mimic those of my earlier sample. These common denominators were a continued tendency of protagonists to be portrayed as approachable, humble, and outside the established circuits of power, and to portray problems of economic elitism and political and social unity, the former condensed into the figure of the wealthy tycoon.

In reviewing contemporary Italian popular culture outside of the television programs I otherwise study here, in Chapter 3 I find that humility, a primary characteristic of the television programs I analyze, plays an ambiguous role in these other facets of contemporary Italian popular culture, while a fairly explicit sexuality is quite prevalent in them, in opposition to a rather surprising demure, or muted sexuality that predominates in my television program set. Building from these observations, I use Gramsci’s analyses of sexuality and its relation to economic production to briefly explore Berlusconi’s position in contemporary Italian political, economic, and sexual culture, where sexuality has now become an integral part of consumption, in-line with wider societal shifts towards a postmodern economic and social culture. I find that, politically, Berlusconi likely erred in his later sexual decadence (or at least in his inability to hide or properly frame such decadence) since successful Italian political rhetoric continues to be resistant, though not impermeable, to “contamination” by the flagrant sexuality that has characterized wide swaths of Italian popular culture since the 1980s. The understated, or absent sexuality of the televised fiction industry in Italy suggests that it might owe part of its success from the early 1990s forward (as discussed in Chapter 1) to its status as a “safe harbor” from the rather frank sexual nature of much generalist television, the tabloid press, popular cinema, and other areas of Italian popular culture.

In Chapter 4, I repeat the Berlusconi-opponent-fictional protagonists survey for the 2007-2008 election. My findings are fleshed out through a consideration of Gramsci’s analyses of education before leading to the concluding sections of this dissertation, where I seek to place the various pieces of my research together under the aegis of Gramsci’s concepts of hegemony and national popular culture. I argue that in 2007-2008 Berlusconi nominally took a step back from the one-man show of previous elections, though upon further inspection this leaving of the limelight served to underscore his centrality, and mythic status, to and among the Italian center-right. Such a positioning was different from the season’s television protagonists, which were again cast, in most cases, as everyday, reluctant, heroes, far from the mythologized Berlusconi. Berlusconi and his then-party, the *Popolo della libertà*, or *Pdl* were, however, in-sync with the

fictional programs of 2007-2008 with their focus on the past—for both nostalgic inspiration and as the source of current problems.⁶ In considering Berlusconi's self-promotion, in this and previous elections, in regard to Gramsci's thoughts on education, I note that Berlusconi is at once non-Gramscian and "Gramscian." His superficial use of statistics and facile reasoning, and his leveraging of common sense to promote specious arguments, are clearly antithetical to Gramsci's thoughts on critical reflection and genuine learning. Yet starting from voters' common sense, and speaking to them in frames of reference (religion, soccer, etc.) already familiar to them, of matters that are clearly and directly relevant to them, is, I argue, Gramscian, in its method, though clearly not in its content or motivation. In some ways Berlusconi's "educative" rhetoric is similar to the moral messaging of the fictional programs I consider, which often, though not always, offer a familiar and simple referential framework, covered with an emotive appeal that is typical of Berlusconi's discourse.

This reflection is followed by an admittedly cursory comparison of Berlusconi's role in Italian politics and popular culture to the relationship between these spheres in the United States from approximately the 1980s forward. I find that Berlusconi's positioning between politics and popular culture appears to most closely resemble Ronald Reagan's in the 1980s, where the spheres seem to have been more closely aligned, at least in content, than the current configuration under Obama. However, I note that in none of these cases, including that of Berlusconi, should any "syncing" between politics and pop culture be seen as complete; rather, as I discuss below, over time there appear to be greater or less intense similarities between these fields, with Berlusconi being notable, among other reasons, for the longevity and degree of his straddling of pop culture and politics, not such straddling *per se*.

Finally, I argue that Berlusconi has helped to create and subsequently leveraged a type of conservative national-popular culture of which, in many aspects, he is the educative symbol, or role model. The contours of this culture are not new or surprising for contemporary students of Italy. This predominant, though not absolutely dominant, culture entails: a feigned cultural populism that has, in the period considered, covered an elite concentration of the production and dissemination of culture, broadly defined; an acceptance of consumption as the typical paradigm of daily existence; the increased centrality of overt sexuality to public life, in particular the circulation of sexually-suggestive imagery of women; a pseudo-religiosity that places emphasis on Catholic rituals and facile cherry-picking of Catholic concepts that do not interfere with; a vision of hedonistic enjoyment as the definition of fulfillment in life.⁷

Such a finding is not surprising, but in my final consideration of Berlusconi I underline how this situation is simultaneously powerful and imperfect; while exemplary, Berlusconi is also often at odds with key aspects of contemporary Italian popular culture. I note that this divergence may increase as Italy slowly moves away from a television-dominated society to an Internet-based one, a shift that will likely place increasing emphasis on the "celebrity politics" that

⁶ "Popolo della libertà" means "The People of Freedom"

⁷ This outline of national-popular culture results from personal observation and consideration of studies such as Massimiliano Panari's *L'egemonia sottoculturale: l'Italia da Gramsci al gossip* (Turin: Einaudi, 2010); Alessia Ricciardi's *After la Dolce Vita: A Cultural Prehistory of Berlusconi's Italy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012); Fabio Dei's *Beethoven e le mondine. Ripensare la cultura popolare*. (Rome: Meltemi Editore, 2007), Alberto Abruzzese and Vincenzo Susca's *Tutto è Berlusconi: radici, metafore e destinazione del tempo nuovo* (Milan: Lupetti, 2004); Noelle Molé's "Trusted Puppets, Tarnished Politicians: Humor and Cynicism in Berlusconi's Italy." *American Ethnologist* 40, no. 2 (2013): 288-299, and Ginsborg and Asquer's aforementioned *Berlusconismo: analisi di un sistema di potere*, in addition to the aforementioned texts by Orsina and Giachetti on *berlusconismo*.

Berlusconi has mastered. Interestingly, while the Berlusconi “type” of politician will remain in Italy, and becoming increasingly important in the near future, such figures will work in a political and cultural context that is increasingly fragmented, within and between these spheres.

Such weakening of the political-cultural syncing of Italian society, a syncing that Berlusconi has helped to create, maintain, and embody, will result from individuals’ enhanced ability to tailor their own personal visions of society, at least as funneled through increasingly specific media outlets. In this context, the larger common denominators that tie different parts of the social fabric together become increasingly tenuous. In Italy, at least, this slow evolution of media consumption and production undermine the potential for a Gramsci-esque national-popular culture, of any type, progressive or conservative. Such a situation suggests that the “Berlusconis” of the future will likewise embody a charismatic and spectacular form of politics, though they will be bereft of his wider cultural “syncing,” which, while never perfect, has nevertheless been the historically most significant facet of his influence.

Acknowledgements

The writing of this dissertation has been a long, and at times complicated and painful, process. From an initial interest in “doing something on Berlusconi,” it has been refined to its present consideration of him with respect to an important, and in the U.S. relatively understudied, aspect of Italian popular culture. The large net the dissertation casts, covering, beyond Berlusconi, Italian television, other aspects of contemporary Italian popular culture, such as the tabloid and soccer press, as well as past instances of the relationship between Italian politics and culture, and even a brief consideration of this relationship in the United States, all commented on through a “prismatic” Gramscian lens, may alert the reader to the difficulties I had in settling on a final topic, and of seeking to contextualize my research in a meaningful way. Still, I think my study of Berlusconi has merit, if in no other way than in adding some detail and nuance to our understanding of his importance to contemporary Italy. My specific contextualization of Berlusconi, primarily with respect to the most “consumed” fictional heroes in contemporary Italy, allows us to better understand how he is both in-line with Italian popular culture and outside some of its important tenets.

“Wrangling” my material together so that such a framing could be made has been time-consuming and problematic, and would not have been possible without the patience of the Berkeley Italian Studies Department generally, and the assistance of Professor Mia Fuller, specifically. I am grateful to the Department, and to Chair Albert Ascoli for their understanding of my dissertation process, and assistance in its completion. I am especially thankful to Professor Fuller for her availability, feedback, and advice in the final stages of this dissertation. I also thank Abigail De Kosnik for her consistent advice and support throughout this project.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

In this dissertation I compare the campaign rhetoric of Silvio Berlusconi to the narratives of fictional or otherwise dramatized Italian television programs. My goal is to better understand Berlusconi's heroic "location" within the political-cultural panorama of contemporary Italy. In particular, I want to know how Berlusconi the hero, in his own configuration, compares to both other political leaders and the protagonists of Italian popular culture. While election discourse and fictional television programs may seem to be odd sources of comparative study, and unusual means to arrive at the aforementioned ends, the underlying traits of both spheres suggest that they are not so different. Politicians and producers usually shoot for the widest audiences, and play off current events and public opinion to do so; political parties and production companies leverage the elite — financial, technological, artistic — to diffuse a message meant for popular consumption; speech and script writers seek to capture these audiences through stories that use hopes and fears to motivate and comfort; both fictional and political spheres draw on the past to comment on the present. In performing these operations, both campaign rhetoric and televised fiction create narratives that simultaneously interpret and shape the contexts that inform them.

Given these characteristics of both campaign discourse and fictional television programming, in addition to the importance of the two spheres in the political, economic, and cultural mix of contemporary Italy, I weigh the significance of their protagonists and the problems these figures must face, through several concepts of Antonio Gramsci. These concepts include, most notably, hegemony and national popular culture, but also his thoughts on common sense, "Supermen," the "sexual question," and education. In contextualizing my findings within Gramsci's discussion of such ideas, I treat election campaigns and televised fiction as proxies for politics and popular culture. It is within and between these fields that I seek to locate Berlusconi, and attempt to add some nuance to the already plentiful literature on the most powerful figure of contemporary Italy. I explain these aspects of my research in greater detail below, but first I offer a brief justification of my comparative study of campaign rhetoric and fictional television programming.

Narrative

In *The Content of the Form*, the historian Hayden White offers a relatively concise description of this political relevance, and of the fading of the distinction between "real" and fictional narratives:

Recent theories of discourse...dissolve the distinction between realistic and fictional discourses based on the presumption of an ontological difference between their respective referents, real and imaginary, in favor of stressing their common aspect as semiological apparatuses that produce meanings by the systematic substitution of signifieds (conceptual contents) for the extra-discursive entities that serve as their referents.⁸

This blurring of realistic and fictional discourse lies at the base of my comparative study of campaign rhetoric and televised fiction. White's work on history's relation to the literary has been useful to me here, since politicians, like historians, seek to establish a convincing

⁸ Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1987), x.

interpretation of events through narrative. Politicians, however, are often not concerned with the objective accuracy of their interpretations. This is where the fictional enters into political discourse, since contemporary campaigns knowingly create dramatic visions of society that offer some semblance of verisimilitude, but which, in the final analysis, are often stretched and pulled enough to resemble fiction more than truth, more invention than documentation. In Berlusconi's famous 2006 diatribe at the *Confindustria* conference, a series of de-contextualized statistics were cited to underline the health of the Italian economy and to discredit what Berlusconi called the pessimism of the mass media. While the statistics, isolated and bereft of further explanation, may have seemed true, the narrative into which they were embedded — that of an economically dynamic and prosperous Italy, largely due to the efforts of his government — was easily refuted by any neutral observer. Berlusconi, however, effectively used this fictional account of events to occupy several days of the news cycle and further his own self-image.⁹

Of course, “narrative” is a term that seems so familiar that we often take its definition for granted. Here, I am not seeking to offer new insight into the potential meanings of the word; I do not belabor an extremely precise explanation of the term's meaning, and feel that a hint of ambiguity can help us to use the term more effectively in tracing Berlusconi's heroic positioning in and between politics and popular culture. As a result, in this dissertation my definition of narrative is a hybrid one borrowed from those of the Oxford English Dictionary:

An account of a series of events or facts that implicitly or explicitly establishes connections between them, used to give an explanatory account of an issue, a period, or a society.¹⁰

My rather broad, hybrid definition of narrative offers the elasticity necessary to work between political discourse and cultural items across a series of primary texts that range from television movies to election posters to viral videos, discussed at greater length throughout this dissertation.

Fiction

If narrative seeks to order phenomena into a coherent story, fiction could represent the explicit attempts of members or institutions of society to go beyond the familiar, to attempt to imagine things as they are not. Or, when direct access to a given experience is not available, fiction is the means to offer a pseudo-experience, to be there without being there. But popular cultural products usually do not have this innovative aim. Instead, popular culture, and especially generalist television, has often operated, especially in the Italian case, on the grounds of the familiar, in both content and form. Stereotypes and safe notions of acceptable content dominate such productions, which are usually delivered via formulaic models.

⁹ See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S5i7KpddSqc> for a video of Berlusconi's speech at the conference, which I discuss in greater detail in Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

¹⁰ The original definitions from which I am borrowing are: “An account of a series of events, facts, etc., given in order and with the establishing of connections between them; a narration, a story, an account”; “In structuralist and post-structuralist theory: a representation of a history, biography, process, etc., in which a sequence of events has been constructed into a story in accordance with a particular ideology; esp. in grand narrative n.[after French *grand récit* (1979 in the passage translated in quot. 1984)] a story or representation used to give an explanatory or justificatory account of a society, period, etc.” Both taken from the Oxford English Dictionary, <http://oed.com/view/Entry/125146?rskey=TdwEhi&result=1#eid>, on April 20, 2011.

Together, the combination of narrative and fiction could represent an attempt to offer a coherent version of alterity: what could be, what should be, but what actually is not. Delineated as such, fiction has clear political implications. Fictional works, from cinema to literature to televised dramas, offer a means to imagine new forms of personal life, political and social organization, etc. This emphasis on what could be, or, in some cases, what should be, clearly echoes the rhetorics of change and accusation that dominate contemporary political campaigns; but popular culture and politics are also similar in their usual preference for continuity as opposed to real change. Both politicians and popular cultural producers might call for the new, or at least ideal, while falling back on familiar patterns of content and form. Italian leftist leader Walter Veltroni's heavy use of the phrase "si può fare" in his 2008 campaign is indicative of this approach. Veltroni asked voters to envision what Italy could be, and assured them that such change was coming:

*Una nuova stagione è cominciata.
Un nuovo tempo si affaccia.
Una nuova Italia si può fare.¹¹*

Yet Veltroni himself was a member of the political establishment, and represented a party with strong political and programmatic lines of continuity to the center-left parties and policies of the past 15 years. Berlusconi has similarly cast himself, repeatedly, as a political novelty, despite his close collusion with, or direct participation in, mainstream politics since at least the late 1970s. This rhetoric of change within a vehicle of the old is also present in Italian televised fiction, where old tropes hide behind new programs. In the 1990s and 2000s, *Il commissario Montalbano* and *Il maresciallo Rocca* were two of the most popular, and critically acclaimed, Italian fictional programs, but beyond their new Italian surfaces, they represented recyclings of familiar detective programs such as the American series *Columbo*.

Protagonists and Problems

Election bids, like the narratives of popular culture, take inputs from the societies that surround them, and output interpretations meant to persuade — to vote, to buy, to believe — or to assuage — anxieties, fears, doubts — often both. These messages are often built around a hero who resolves a problem. As a consequence, in this dissertation I analyze political and fictional or dramatized stories, focusing on the protagonists and the problems of the given narratives. This approach helps us to understand which protagonists appeal to a public in a given season, and which problems seem to be pressing, to either the cultural producer or consumer, or both.

Despite the clear political and social implications of these popular narratives, most contemporary televised fictional programs, at least in Italy, are dismissed as mere entertainment — as innocuous vehicles to take a break from the daily grind. But if the Berlusconi era in Italy has taught us anything, it is that mere entertainment has political consequences: the *Veline* and their admirers are a case in point, as are the legions of housewives that have traditionally been Berlusconi's most reliable supporters, and among the most consistent consumers of his

¹¹ See, for example, Veltroni's speech at the Constituent Assembly of the Democratic Party's (*Partito democratico*) 2008 convention, February 16, 2008: <http://www.partitodemocratico.it/dettaglio/44814/>

television.¹² To underscore the political importance of this entertainment, consider the success of the program *Il commissario Montalbano*.

Italy has a population of approximately 56 million people. In the Spring of 2010, between 9 and 10 million of the peninsula's inhabitants, or approximately 15% of the entire population, regularly tuned-in to the newest episodes of *Montalbano*, one of the best, and most watched, fictional Italian television programs. Of course, many of these viewers were likely doing something else as they watched, or changed the channel after a couple of minutes. But the sheer quantity of viewers that *Montalbano*, and other successful fictional television programs, attract, lend them a potential political relevance that few other Italian cultural products can match. Even if there is no direct correlation between a Montalbano viewer and a vote for a given candidate, the popularity of the show clearly demonstrates that the images it projects and the feelings it arouses resonate with viewers on a very large scale.

Despite the significant audiences of Italian televised fiction, however, there has not yet been a formal study of how the narratives of these fictional programs, the most consumed stories of contemporary Italian culture, relate to the country's political narratives, in particular those offered by Berlusconi from 2000 forward. My dissertation aims to fill this gap.

Gramsci

Gramsci's ideas are useful for my study for several reasons. Aside from the obvious Italian perspective of his work, which allows me to more easily move between the Berlusconi present and the Italian cultural and political past. In particular, the concepts of "hegemony" and the "national-popular" serve as excellent "bridge" terms between these different chronological contexts. The extensive use of these concepts by scholars working in fields outside of traditional "hard" considerations of power (military and economic might, police force, etc.) is indicative of their common emphasis on the importance of culture — high and low — in the formulation and maintenance of political power. "Culture," including high and low literature, education, and moral and intellectual bearing, was, for Gramsci, the social area where hegemonic ideology could be shaped and spread. While the exact time and location of the creation of hegemony in relatively static and revolutionary contexts changed as Gramsci's political thought progressed, throughout his writings it is clear that he accords hegemony—the apparently consensual cultural predominance of a given class over, or among, others—the status of a primary aspect of power.

Given this political importance of culture, particularly its popular strains, in both an anthropological and artistic sense, Gramsci scholars have noted that his interest in various aspects of popular life tends to emphasize the political function of aspects of culture — from the characteristics of folklore to the types of popular media produced in given period. As a result, Gramsci's evaluations of popular literature and other texts for the masses are often based on a functional analysis of how and why such texts may appeal to a given audience, and what this appeal portends politically.¹³

¹² "Veline" refers to scantily-clad women that "adorn" (given their lack of voice or other most other forms of agency) some Italian television programs. As discussed in Chapter 3, veline have become symbols of Italian popular culture from the 1980s forward. The housewife information comes from Paul Ginsborg's *Silvio Berlusconi: Television, Power, & Patrimony* (London: Verso, 2005), 98.

¹³ Antonio Gramsci, *Antonio Gramsci: Selections from Cultural Writings*. Eds. David Forgacs and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 342.

Gramsci's biggest concern with many of these cultural items was what he saw as the illusions of reality they gave to the masses, in particular their contrived models of behavior. These illusions, and the insincerity of what Gramsci calls the "operatic conception of life," are described in the *Prison Notebooks* as phenomena that interfere with new, critical ways of thinking and being.¹⁴ It is in the creation and conditioning of such a new critical consciousness, capable of revealing one's true relation to others, that Gramsci saw the political importance of culture, a battleground where the necessary new ideas and emotions could be conveyed and elicited prior to their incorporation into political practice. This cultural battle results in the hegemonic ascendance of one group over another, though this ascendance need not be total. In the Italian case, Gramsci saw the failure of a progressive hegemony to take hold in Italy as resulting in part from the non national-popular tendencies of Italian culture.¹⁵

By national-popular, Gramsci intended a culture inspired by, but not beholden to the perceived intellectual limits of, popular realities. A truly national-popular culture would speak the literal and symbolic language of the popular masses, but be rational and progressive in its content, avoiding the conservative clichés and insincere posturing that Gramsci detected in the popular literature and emerging cinema of Italy in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Ideally, this national-popular culture would unite intellectuals and the proletariat, and then the rural masses, into a vanguard that would provide the cultural force necessary to progressively change Italian society.¹⁶ While times have certainly changed, the overwhelming influence of television, an intensely popular medium in its contemporary configuration in Italy, has led several scholars to turn towards the concept of the national-popular, or similar ideas, in an attempt to explain the link between popular culture and political power in 21st century Italy.

Massimiliano Panari has recently described the shift to a "gossip" culture in Italian television and print media as a conservative expansion and domination of national-popular culture that facilitates the spectacular politics of the Berlusconi period in Italy.¹⁷ Panari identifies the Italian right's ability to harness the symbolic and immaterial in the postfordist period, as opposed to the Italian left's insistence on material interests, as a primary factor in the success of Berlusconi and his allies. The popular mode of this emphasis on the symbolic, in the form of simplistic television programs, star-obsessed media, and studied anecdotes have helped to substantiate the political rhetoric of the right and center-right. This mode emphasizes common sense practicality, individual, regional, and corporate freedom, and a generally superficial and simplistic approach to events. These tools encourage distracted voters to frequently act against their own material interests to favor a symbolic order that appeals to them. For Panari, the shallow, sensationalistic, and manipulated content of Italian television, heavily consumed by many Italians, serves as the propulsive force behind what has become a national-popular culture, though not the progressive one Gramsci envisioned. It is on the grounds of this culture, which appears to have taken root in the 1980s and grown in the following years, that Berlusconi has been able to remain at the political fore for much of the last twenty years.

¹⁴ Antonio Gramsci. "Il gusto melodrammatico" and "Il melodramma" in *Letteratura e vita nazionale* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1987), 50.

¹⁵ See the sections "Hegemony, Relations of Force, Historical Bloc," 189-221, and "Popular Culture," 363-378, in Antonio Gramsci. *The Antonio Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings, 1916-1935*. Ed. David Forgacs (New York: NYU Press, 2000)

¹⁶ Forgacs, David. "National-Popular: Genealogy of a Concept." *Formations of Nation and People* (London: Routledge, 1984), 83-98

¹⁷ Massimiliano Panari. *L'egemonia sottoculturale: l'Italia da Gramsci al gossip* (Turin: Einaudi, 2010).

While Panari's ideas are convincing, his framing of Italian cultural dynamics could be improved. That a non-progressive Italian national popular culture exists in Italy today seems beyond a doubt, but his claim that the Italian left has lost its hegemonic role in peninsular culture should be better contextualized. In regard to high-culture, progressive thinkers, artists, and other cultural producers continue to dominate, as they have throughout the postwar period. But it is hard to see how a national-popular culture has been stolen by the right when this culture, even if considered in an anthropological sense, beyond a mere consideration of the cultural industries, has never been, on a wide scale, either national nor progressive. Communist party organs promoted their own versions of the popular press in the early postwar period, but it would be difficult to label the majority of the popular literature, cinema, or other cultural products or lifestyles that have appeared in Italy in the last sixty years as socially and politically reformist.

Enrica Asquer has recently provided a provocative analysis of the transformation of one aspect of Italian popular culture that helps to illustrate the cultural-political dynamic of the late Berlusconi period.¹⁸ Using a weekly gossip magazine as her illustrative text, Asquer outlines how the norms of Italian popular culture have evolved from the mid-1990s forward. *Noi, la settimanale degli italiani*, was originally conceived as a weekly magazine dedicated to frank examinations of the lives of typical Italians, including statistics and descriptive articles that outlined the current status of the normal Italian. Born out of the ashes of *Tangentopoli*, or the Bribesville corruption scandal that toppled the Italian political establishment in the early 1990s, the publication was meant to focus attention on the value of everyday Italians; still, it regularly included interviews with, or other pieces on, notables from various fields, including fairly regular articles on the late Pope John Paul II. In March of 1995, coinciding with a change in publisher (to Mondadori, from *Silvio Berlusconi Editore*), the publication began to change, and began to dedicate more space to the private lives of notable Italians from the worlds of business and show business. These pieces were often presented as interviews with these notables in their homes, in their "normal" guises, away from the spotlight of public attention. Asquer argues that at the center of these portraits was a focus on "collecting" that synthesized key aspects of Italian material culture: ostentation and consumption mixed with conservation and security. Wealth was lauded in these pieces, which used this *collezionismo* to signify the material success of careers represented as daring, precarious, and the sole result of individual abilities.¹⁹

In the 2000s the publication, now known as *Chi*, changed again, with more photos and more gossip replacing any type of previous pedagogical tone. Notables in their houses were replaced by an emphasis on bodies and plastic surgery, with a change in style from aristocratic collecting to trash fashion à la *Dolce e Gabbana*. But here too media celebrities, having replaced everyday Italians in the pages of *Chi*, were framed in "real" scenes, the familiar "caught in the act" spreads of most Western tabloids. For Asquer, these changes represent a case study in the changes of Italian aesthetics and ethics, which she argues have become "sempre più popolaresca, fintamente popolare e populista."²⁰ This cultural populism, for Asquer, pretends to remove the

¹⁸ Enrica Asquer. "Popolare, popolaresco, populista." *Berlusconismo: analisi di un sistema di potere* (Rome: Laterza, 2011), 102-119.

¹⁹ Asquer, 111-112.

²⁰ "always more popolaresque, falsely popular, and populist," 103.

mediations between elites and the masses (*Striscia la notizia* comes to mind here as well) and serves as a substitute for real popular participation in political life).²¹

While Gramsci does not specifically address tabloid literature, his thoughts on other specific forms of culture, particularly the popular literature of Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries, are still particularly relevant to my consideration of Italian televised fiction and, though to a lesser degree, politics in the Berlusconi period.²² Such popular literature closely resembles the generalist fictional television programming of RAI and Mediaset, if not in specific content than in its general tone and aim — simple, reassuring, and, in ideal cases, serial in output and consumption. While times and technologies have changed, Gramsci's thoughts on the political consequences of such popular culture are still valid, especially in relation to the television programs and election material considered here. Politics has become increasingly spectacular, and serial, while television has become the most prominent storytelling apparatus in Italian history, at least quantitatively.²³ The popular public that once read serial novels has now shifted its narrative attention, at least in the years considered here, to the television screen, where it experiences the protagonists and problems, fictional and political, discussed in this dissertation.

Since 1994, the primary star of Italian political culture has been Silvio Berlusconi. At the same time, as the informal head of a private media empire, in addition to his influence on Italian public broadcasting when prime minister, Berlusconi has also had a profound influence on the fictional content that Italians consume. This “bridge” position between realpolitik and entertainment, where Berlusconi represents a type of personified “culture industry,” with overwhelming influence in politics, the economy, and culture, makes him an especially fruitful object for Gramscian study. In this dissertation I analyze how Berlusconi the hero, the media celebrity, the superstar, compares with the heroes of the most consumed Italian cultural products in the last two decades, the protagonists of televised fictional or dramatized programs. These protagonists, as privileged identities of Berlusconi's own medium, television, represent useful foils for understanding the exact nature of Berlusconi's protagonism on the Italian stage. While fictional, or dramatized versions of historical figures, these heroes are designed to attract attention, relate to audience members, and drive home messages that must resonate with viewers. These are the same qualities of successful politicians, including Berlusconi. By comparing Berlusconi with the heroes of Italian fictional television programs, then, we can begin to see what might be the relationship between Berlusconi's populism and Italian popular culture; examining the problems posed by the political and fictional spheres, we can better contextualize this relationship; using the vocabulary and perspective of Gramsci, we can attempt to theorize what the consequences of this relationship might be.

²¹ Noelle J. Molé has recently analyzed *Striscia la notizia* (or “Shred the News”) as an exemplar of the relationship between humor and cynicism in Berlusconi's Italy. “Trusted Puppets, Tarnished Politicians: Humor and Cynicism in Berlusconi's Italy.” *American Ethnologist* 40.2 (2013): 288-299.

²² See the section “Letteratura popolare” of *Letteratura e vita nazionale*, 70-92.

²³ Milly Buonanno has echoed Horace Newcomb in discussing contemporary television in this light. See, for example Buonanno's *Italian TV Drama and Beyond: Stories from the Soil, Stories from the Sea* (Chicago: Intellect Books, 2012), 228 .

Berlusconi's Biography

My case studies of Berlusconi begin *in media res*, with his successful election campaign in 2000-2001. I have chosen to start my more detailed analysis there, and not in 1994, when Berlusconi was first elected prime minister, because the latter has already been extensively studied, and because my comparative material, the fictional television programs of Italian television, really only came into their own as a robust piece of Italian popular culture in the late 1990s and early 2000s, as discussed later in this chapter. In this initial chapter I trace a very brief biographical outline of Berlusconi before discussing the most prominent components of his political communication. My goal is to supply a summary of Berlusconi's rhetoric in the period before his consolidation of power, which I explore in greater detail in the later chapters of this dissertation.²⁴

Berlusconi was born on September 29, 1936 in Milan. His father was a bank manager, his mother a Pirelli employee turned housewife. Though raised middle-class, Berlusconi knew some hardship as a child. His father fled to Switzerland to avoid Mussolini's Salò call-to-arms in 1943, leaving Berlusconi's mother to care for him and his younger siblings until his father returned several months after the war. The future premier has made much of his education by Salesian friars, noting both his own excellence and the useful severity of his religious schooling. Berlusconi graduated from the University of Milan with a degree in law in 1961.

Following his studies, Berlusconi embarked in earnest on his business career, having already run various operations, more or less formally, on a smaller or larger scale, since high school. Such activities, which would later provide much of the material for Berlusconi's projection of himself as a self-made man, included doing homework for classmates (complete with a money-back guarantee if the homework failed to receive a certain grade), operating the projector at the local cinema (in order to gain free admittance), and his well-known stint as a cruise ship entertainer and band member (activities that, according to Berlusconi, helped him to pay for school and meet women, the presence of the latter being a constant theme in his life narrative).

After entering the construction business in the 1960s, Berlusconi embarked on several projects before finally "arriving" with the *Milano 2* residential development. An urban oasis of apartments, schools, parks, shops near the heart of Milan, *Milano 2* might best be described as an urban suburb, a self-contained and pre-planned area meant to fend off the perceived worst of city life. *Milano 2*, begun in the early 1970s, is where Berlusconi would get his start in television. He quickly realized the potential for private broadcasting after establishing a closed circuit service for *Milano 2*. From this initial effort, Berlusconi would go on to acquire local stations throughout the Italian peninsula, finally assembling a de facto national network by 1981.

Following a grueling battle with established media interests Rizzoli and Mondadori, Berlusconi acquired the remaining two national networks from these companies by 1984, leaving him as the sole private television networks in Italy. This success was largely abetted by Bettino Craxi, the Socialist prime minister of Italy from 1983 to 1987. Craxi's and other politicians' exit from the political stage in the early 1990s, as part of the Bribesville scandal, a result of the *Mani pulite*, or Clean Hands corruption investigation, opened the political door to Berlusconi, an invitation that, in the face of serious financial and legal troubles, he could not refuse.

²⁴ The following biographic information comes from Giuseppe Fiore's *Il venditore: storia di Silvio Berlusconi e la Fininvest* (Milan: Garzanti, 1995).

Leveraging his existing base of employees and contacts in the business world, Berlusconi won the 1994 election only several months after officially entering politics (though we now know that the preparations for his jump into politics had been in the works since at least the summer of 1993).²⁵ Though his first government would fall after only seven months in office — largely due to internal fighting among his coalition and Berlusconi’s own legal problems — Berlusconi remained in politics and worked to professionalize his party, *Forza Italia* (borrowed from the Italian national soccer team, and roughly translated as “Go Italy!”), and to consolidate his alliance with what would later become his primary coalition partners, *Alleanza nazionale* (National Alliance) and *La lega nord* (Northern League). He would go on to lose the 1996 elections, in part because the *Lega* ran alone, before accumulating important victories in European and regional elections in 1999 and 2000, respectively. These victories set the stage for Berlusconi’s victory in the 2001 election, from which he would govern Italy until 2006. Though he lost the 2006 election (by only 25,000 votes), Berlusconi would not be out of power for long. His coalition again won national elections in 2008 after the center-left, in part aided by Berlusconi’s meddling, self-destructed. He would remain in power until the European debt crisis forced him to resign in November 2011. In late 2012, frustrated with his party’s poor political standing and seeing an opportunity in new elections, Berlusconi again took to the political field (after attempting to abdicate his leadership of the center-right), removing his party’s support for the Monti technical government and forcing new elections. The *Popolo della libertà* (“People of Freedom”), or *Pdl*, did fairly well in the Italian elections of Spring 2013, eventually forming a national-unity government with the center-left *Partito democratico* (“Democratic Party,” or *Pd*). Though Berlusconi was not part of the executive of this government, as leader of the *Pdl* (and as a Senator) he ultimately controlled the center-right’s actions and positioning within the government. This situation was relatively short-lived, however. At the time of this writing, in the spring of 2014, Berlusconi, convicted of tax evasion and stripped of his status as a senator, had forced a schism among the *Pdl*, re-forming *Forza Italia* and abandoning his support for the Letta unity government, which would itself fall after internal problems among the Italian left. In May of 2014, Berlusconi was set to begin community service for his conviction, even as he led his reformed *Forza Italia* into the elections for the European Parliament to be held later in the month.

Berlusconi’s Narratives in the 1980s and 1990s

Berlusconi’s political communication can be described in several broad categories, or themes, that run throughout his career, private and political. I categorize these rhetorics as follows: the self-made business man; the sporting champion; the virile Latin lover; the buffoonish everyman; the Christ-like martyr. The common threads that unite these various themes are success and, to a lesser extent, a dualism that usually hides outright hypocrisy. From business to sports, to women, to personal sacrifice, Berlusconi reiterates his perceived successful endeavors, while blaming his failures and potential contradictions on others. In this last instance, Italian magistrates are his most frequent scapegoats, but it should be noted that Berlusconi’s *vittimismo* also elevates the Italian media in general and the “communists” of the left to powerful conspirators out to bring him and Italy down.

²⁵ Alexander Stille. *The Sack of Rome: How a Beautiful European Country with a Fabled History and a Storied Culture Was Taken Over by a Man Named Silvio Berlusconi* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2006), 32-39.

There are several contradictions in Berlusconi's public persona. While after his recent sex scandals the façade is no longer tenable, for much of his professional life Berlusconi offered himself as both the virile Latin lover and the perfect family man, with a self-reported emphasis on serial seduction balanced by a rhetoric of marriage, children, and an great reverence for his mother. The seducer and husband roles Berlusconi assumed in public functioned offered him, respectively, a link to male voters with similar proclivities, as well as (often nominally) Catholic Italians that believe in the traditional family.

Berlusconi's linguistic self-portrayal as an Average Joe contrasts by his less publicized posturings as a man of culture. In addition to the prefaces that he has written to editions of Erasmus' *In Praise of Folly* and Machiavelli's *The Prince*, Berlusconi has also been an external business columnist for *Corriere della Sera* (in the 1970s) and an avowed patron of the fine arts and horticulture.²⁶ Berlusconi's linguistic characterization of himself as a normal guy, complete with crude expressions, informal delivery, and an emphasis on sports- and sex-related content, hides an elitism that most "normal" voters might admire, but to which they cannot relate.

In its content and form, then, Berlusconi's self-characterization is reminiscent of his television. Linguistically accessible to the general public — lowest common denominator humor, scantily clad women, soundbite news coverage — Mediaset's programming generally offers a rose-tinted view of a world where everything that is possible is good, and ready to be taken by those with initiative, if only Italian magistrates and/or leftists would get out of the way. Such programming pays homage to sport, sex, and success, and curtails questioning of this triumvirate with a laugh-track and carefully worded derision of those that worry about details, causes, and effects.

The mode of Berlusconi's messaging is also informed by his approach to, and practice of, advertising sales. Stille, among others, has noted how Berlusconi began to master his political talking points — liberation from the state, protection from communists, celebration of individual and corporate freedom — and his effective, charismatic delivery — an emphasis on personalization, imagery, and optimism — while speaking to both advertisers and his advertising sales force at Publitalia, the advertising wing of Mediaset, his television interest. As one Publitalia employee noted, "Very little that Berlusconi has said or done in politics has surprised me, because so much of Berlusconi the politician was already in his management style and in the speeches he gave to the sales force."²⁷ Such speeches included Berlusconi's invitation to his salesforce to keep "the sun in your pocket," and to persuade through images rather than logic: "Every time you see your clients, speak to them in images rather than concepts... Logic is convincing but is easily forgotten, while the images strikes and remains in the memory... That's why I talk to you in images."²⁸ This quote, also delivered to his salesforce, illustrates a strategy that would become a hallmark of Berlusconi's political communication, though perhaps in more complicated ways than casual Berlusconi observers would expect.

Aside from the overt imagery of Berlusconi's political advertisements, which I discuss in greater detail in subsequent chapters, there is implicit imagery that accompanies Berlusconi's political rhetoric. For example, Berlusconi's later insistence on including attractive women in his electoral lists should be noted not only for its cynical twist on gender equality, but as a political

²⁶ These prefaces are discussed in his 2001 tabloid biography, *Una storia italiana*, analyzed in Chapter 2 of this dissertation.

²⁷ Stille, 74.

²⁸ Stille, 78 [Originally reported in Stefano d'Anna and Gigi Moncalvo, *Berlusconi in Concert* (London: Otzium, 1994), 154].

strategy built around the image of beautiful women. Former government ministers like Mara Carfagna or the ex-Lombardy Regional Council Member Nicole Minetti become symbols of the Berlusconi lifestyle, decorations that surround him and add to his aura of, among other tropes, the good life and vibrant sexuality. Berlusconi's use of contractual language and gestures should also be seen in this light. As I discuss in greater detail in later chapters, the specific content of Berlusconi's 2001 "Contract with the Italians," various international "gaffes," or other intentionally "spontaneous" actions — the use of vulgar language, his 2006 diatribe against *Confindustria*, etc. — is not as important as the extra-diegetic image of Berlusconi that subsequently circulates through the mediasphere: Berlusconi boldly signing a contract on national television; Berlusconi breaking stuffy, formal, decorum as a "normal" guy; Berlusconi standing up to the giant business, media, political, and judicial interests (in his own narrative) that prevent him from delivering the liberal utopia he and his voters crave.

Berlusconi's emphasis on imagery, as well as his well-documented use of opinion polls, focus groups, and other forms of market research, is less revolutionary in terms of Italian political advertising than is commonly believed. In *Promocrazia: Tecniche pubblicitarie della comunicazione politica da Lenin a Berlusconi*, Marcello Walter Bruno outlines several Italian political campaigns that made use of similar techniques in the age of private television prior to Berlusconi's entrance into politics.²⁹ In 1983, the Christian Democrats (*Democrazia cristiana*, or DC), the most important party in Italian politics from the late 1940s to the early 1990s, used images like milk about to boil over and a baby chick about to fall into a void in television advertisements meant to warn against the communist threat. While clearly different from Berlusconi's imagery, such "wholesome" messaging played off voters' imaginaries to warn against a communist surge. The same election season saw the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) rely heavily on personalized advertisements built around its leader, Bettino Craxi (a political ally and close friend of Berlusconi's), or famous individuals from sports and entertainment, to publicize its cause.

In 1987, the PSI would also use a heavily segmented television campaign, with specific advertisements for specific demographics and specific arguments, while the DC would again turn to wholesome images in its television spots — weddings, birthday parties with grandma, etc. — supported by a notable jingle and two slogans: "*Forza Italia!*" and "*Fai vincere le cose che contano.*" The exact text of the jingle is as follows: "*Per un sorriso/ per la libertà/ per un grande sogno d'amore/ per una vita di serenità/ per la tua casa e il lavoro/ il futuro dei tuoi figli/ forza Italia!*" with an offscreen speaker concluding the advertisement with "*Fai vincere le cose che contano.*"³⁰ Such advertisements are notable less for their content itself than for the continuity they underscore in Berlusconi's messaging. Here we already see proto-elements of these phenomena with the PSI's emphasis on Craxi and celebrities. At the same time, the PSI's use of targeted television advertising represents an early politicization of Berlusconi's marketing model. Most interesting, however, is the use of "*forza Italia!*" as a campaign slogan by the DC, well-ahead of Berlusconi's appropriation of the chant in 1993. The DC's jingle also includes numerous elements that Berlusconi would later make use of, especially in his 1994 "*discesa in campo*" speech. "*Sorriso*," "*libertà*," "*sogno*," "*amore*," and "*futuro*" are all keywords in Berlusconi's lexicon, and he has also used the idea of the "casa" to resonate with voters,

²⁹ Marcello Walter. Bruno, *Promocrazia: Tecniche pubblicitarie della comunicazione politica da Lenin a Berlusconi*. (Genova: Costa & Nolan, 1996).

³⁰ "For a smile/for freedom/for a great dream of love/for a serene life/for your home and job/for the future of your children/go Italy!"

especially those who live in illegally-constructed dwellings (Berlusconi has generally supported the legalizing of such properties through amnesties) and, more recently, through his fierce opposition to an austerity-induced property tax on primary residences (the “*Imu*,” implemented by the Monti government in response to international pressure to improve Italy’s financial stability, later modified so as to apply only to second homes).

In light of such advertisements, it becomes clear that, in some respects, Berlusconi’s political messaging represents continuity with the Italian political past. His political messaging also appears to have inherited some of the modalities of Craxi’s PSI, but Berlusconi appears to have taken these earlier, though in the Italian case certainly not original, emphases on personalization and celebrity to new extremes. Berlusconi does appear, however, to have been an Italian original, in the postwar era at least, in one form of his political communication: his expert use of “media events” to control the public’s attention.

My use of the term “media events” differs somewhat from Dayan and Katz’ concept of the same name.³¹ Whereas these scholars have offered an elaborate, and convincing explication of the contents, form, and social and political significance of mostly ceremonial televised events such as the Olympics, royal weddings, or important political agreements such as the Camp David accords, I use “media event” to refer to those instances where Berlusconi has taken control of public attention through provocative, and usually intentional, actions that are designed to occupy the near-term media cycle. The aforementioned diatribe at the 2006 *Confindustria* conference is an example of such a “media event,” as was Berlusconi’s “walk-off” interview with a RAI journalist during the same election season. In this last case, which I discuss at greater length in Chapter 3, Berlusconi stormed out of a live televised interview with Lucia Annunziata, host of the program *In mezz’ora* (In a Half Hour), complaining that Annunziata would not let him speak about the issues which the public wanted to hear. Annunziata certainly did not cater to Berlusconi as many Italian journalists do, and was well within her bounds to direct the line of questioning on her own program. Unfortunately for Italian political discussion, however, Annunziata, like Berlusconi himself, would not let her interlocutor finish his thoughts, which at times gave the impression of her being an overbearing and impolite reporter. Annunziata’s demeanor and Berlusconi’s abrupt walk-off allowed him to frame the episode as an example of left-wing journalists presiding over a public network, and hence position himself as the liberalizer resisting these repressive and biased norms. In addition to plenty of coverage through traditional news outlets — the printed press and the newscasts of the six principal networks — the video also appeared later the same day at a Berlusconi rally, leaving little doubt that the “walkout” was planned in advance.

In Dayan and Katz’ rubric, such events would fall under the “conquest” narrative of media events.³² Inspired by Greimas’ outline of the three turning points of the hero, Dayan and Katz’ model assigns a type of event to the respective turning points of Greimas’ schema. The “contest” qualifies the hero, while the “conquest” shows the hero reaching beyond the limits of the possible; the “coronation” allows the hero to be recognized and glorified.³³ While not a traditional “impossible” feat in itself, the Annunziata incident played into Berlusconi’s wider narrative of him against the establishment, a binary situation that, in his framing, has required

³¹ Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz. *Media Events: the Live Broadcasting of History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 1-24.

³² Dayan and Katz, 25-54.

³³ Dayan and Katz, 29. The authors’ source for Greimas’ work is Algirdas J. Greimas, *Sémantique structural* (Paris: Larousse, 1966).

both tremendous personal sacrifice and superhuman will to resolve. This “conquest,” in Dayan and Katz’ model, corresponds to Max Weber’s “charismatic” type of authority. To Weber’s other forms of authority — rational and traditional, Dayan and Katz append, respectively, the “contest” (a debate, an election, etc.) and the “coronation” narrative forms.³⁴ In Berlusconi’s case, it appears that charismatic authority, built in large part on a mythology of amazing accomplishment and sacrifice, harnessed in part through media events such as those described here, precedes the rational authority he enjoys when elected.

Aside from occupying the media, and therefore strongly influencing the political agenda, these media events are potent stand-ins for authentic political participation. Berlusconi offers himself to supporters as an embodiment of their frustration with the status quo, mostly comprised, in Berlusconi’s rhetoric, of the big business establishment, the media interests arrayed against him, and, most notably, the “communists,” left-wing judges, and the illiberal State (the three are often mixed together in a giant “othering” that appeals to parts of Berlusconi’s base — the relatively uneducated, the self-employed, the owners of small firms). Berlusconi does not just say that he is against the leftist occupation of the RAI or the out-of-touch business elite, he performs such rhetoric by walking out on interviews, upending conferences with political rants, etc. With television helping to make public political space private, i.e. the family room as privileged, though not exclusive, site of political information, discussion, and motivation, Berlusconi’s public performances, designed with the viewing, and not attending, public in mind, offer supporters pseudo-engagement in the political process. The average viewer cannot stand up to leftist journalists or the patriarchs of Italy; Berlusconi, however, can, and does.

Berlusconi frequently frames such political activity with religious rhetoric to burnish his moral credentials, and to galvanize his supporters. His decision to enter politics is indicative:

Ho sentito...una specie di responsabilità che non poteva essere elusa e, forse esagerando, mi sono sentito nella condizione di chi, dovendo partire per un bel viaggio, si è trovato improvvisamente davanti qualcuno bisognoso d’aiuto. Ecco, nonostante la prospettiva del viaggio, nonostante la vacanza programmata, non sarebbe stato possibile girare la testa dall’altra parte, si sarebbe trattato di una vera e propria omission di soccorso. È per questo – perché ci sentiamo tutti responsabili, chiamati a uscire dal nostro egoismo per fare quanto possiamo per il nostro paese – che siamo qui, che abbiamo risposto a questa chiamata alle armi.³⁵

Here Berlusconi renounces a vacation, an ideal example of the hedonism present in Berlusconi’s television and in part of his political persona, to come to the aid of Italy, desperately in need of help. Berlusconi further “feels” a responsibility, as part of a “calling,” that leads him to give up his existing life and accept his responsibility.³⁶ While this leaving the old for the new is reminiscent of spiritual conversion, this emphasis on feeling is symptomatic of Berlusconi’s wider use of irrational vision to describe his decisions: “real wisdom...is not found in a rational attitude, in-line with existing premises, and therefore sterile, but in the far-sighted visionary

³⁴ Dayan and Katz, 25. The authors’ source for Weber’s work is *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946).

³⁵ Silvio Berlusconi. *Una storia italiana* (Milan: Mondadori, 2001), 75

³⁶ Giuliana Parotto, *Sacra Officina: La simbolica religiosa di Silvio Berlusconi* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2007), 23 and 39 for Berlusconi sacrificing what he otherwise promotes.

madness.”³⁷ Such visions lead Berlusconi, in his own narrative, to propose the unthinkable, like entering politics, and engaging in epic battles, against Italian communists, magistrates, and the State, here configured as a giant Hobbesian Leviathan that suffocates freedom:

...la loro [the communists] concezione è ancora quello dello Stato autoritario, dello Stato-partito, dello Stato-padrone, dello Stato cosiddetto “etico,” dello Stato cioè che è una divinità, quasi un moloch al di sopra dei cittadini, che viene prima del cittadino e della società, uno Stato che è il valore assoluto, uno Stato, secondo la loro ideologia, che è la fonte stessa dei diritti della persona, che è il padrone dei diritti dei cittadini.³⁸

Parotto has argued that this Leviathan, in Berlusconi’s rhetoric, represents a type of Antichrist, a contemporary incarnation of the beast of Job, against which Berlusconi pits himself, a sacrificial hero.³⁹ This is a trope that Berlusconi recycled for his entrance into politics. He used the same narrative in framing his fight for private television, i.e. Berlusconi against the State to save citizens and businesses from the RAI monolith. It was also present in his transformation, or to stay on theme, “resurrection,” of the football club A.C. Milan (discussed at greater length below). Despite his overwhelming success with the club, Berlusconi saw persecutors and conspiracies against him in the traditional press and among opposing teams.⁴⁰

The savior trope often contains an old vs. new juxtaposition, and this is also clear in Berlusconi’s case. Against old establishments (traditional urban development, the RAI, the soccer status quo, the politics of the first Republic), Berlusconi offers new utopias (*Milano 2* and *Milano 3*, private television, his A.C. Milan, his new form of politics). Surrounded by these endeavors, Berlusconi has consistently represented himself as the new man. In the political context, this new man has been fueled by the aforementioned visions, lending a connotation of spiritual conversion to his political activities. This feeling of conversion has been abetted by Berlusconi’s emphasis on religious language.⁴¹ Religious metaphors and images (“crossing the desert,” “drinking from the bitter cup,” “the Lord’s Anointed,” etc.) are familiar tropes to Italians, even to non-Catholics, embedded as they are in the Catholic religious and cultural history of the peninsula. Berlusconi’s perpetual political “novelty” thus hides, also in this case, a continuation with the Italian religious and cultural traditions, and to a lesser degree the Christian rhetoric of the DC.

Berlusconi’s religious language is not limited to politics. Before Milan played Romanian side Steaua Bucharest in the 1989 European Cup, he declared: “Ho chiesto a Dio di far perdere i comunisti.”⁴² Such an affirmation underscores the mixing of topoi typical of his discourse. In this case, religion is mixed with politics and sports, this last a topic that often enters his political

³⁷ *Una storia italiana*, 27. Berlusconi offers this opinion while discussing his admiration for Erasmus’ *In Praise of Folly*.

³⁸ Silvio Berlusconi. “Discorso per le Elezioni amministrative.” in *L’Italia che ho in mente* (Milan: Mondadori, 2000), 199.

³⁹ Parotto, 18-26. Parotto, however, does not see Berlusconi’s eternal struggles as a form of explicit *vittimismo*, or victimism, but rather a structural aspect of Christian symbolism: the Savior, almost by definition, is a victim.

⁴⁰ Fiore, *Il Venditore*, 137-138 and Nicola Porro & Pippo Russo, “Berlusconi and Other Matters: the Era of ‘Football Politics’.” *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 5, no. 3 (2000): 348-371.

⁴¹ Parotto, 33-34.

⁴² “I asked God to make the communists lose.” Berlusconi’s declaration after leaving a stadium chapel prior to Milan’s 1989 European Cup victory over Steaua Bucharest. Reported in Massimo Gramellini. “Berlusconi ovvero la repubblica del pallone.” *Micro-Mega*, I, 1994, 134 ss. Quoted in Parotto, p. 22n.

rhetoric. Such sporting language, built mostly around football (“soccer” in the U.S.), has served several functions for Berlusconi. In addition to his wider business success, he has repeatedly leveraged the victories of Milan, his soccer club, to exemplify his own managerial talent and to burnish his image of dynamism and normalcy. In this last case, football’s widespread popularity in Italy, which cuts across political and class divisions, has allowed Berlusconi’s use of football metaphors to simplify political language and cognitive frames, while also making him just one of the guys — knowledgeable and passionate about his favorite team. Compared to the *politichese*, or political-speak, of Italy’s traditional political class, where obtuseness and insider vocabulary were the norm, Berlusconi has brought direct and simple language to Italian politics, with football metaphors having served as one of, if not the, most important vehicles for this simplification.⁴³ In speaking of teams, fields, opponents, winning and losing, he has attempted to portray what in reality is mostly a complicated and convoluted process, Italian politics, into a transparent and simple game, with clear winners and losers. Cognitively, this framing supplements the “duel” nature of the majoritarian system that Italy adopted in the early 1990s, in which two large groupings faced-off for control of parliament, as opposed to the “multi-competitor” proportional representation system that had existed in the country since 1948.⁴⁴

In conjunction with the religious metaphors also typical of Berlusconi’s rhetoric, the simple us vs. them football framing of politics raises the stakes of political activity. Ties, while possible in some sports, including football, are anathema to the political process as outlined by Berlusconi, as is compromise. Italian politics in Berlusconi’s discourse is all or nothing. Supporters are nominally invited to be part of his team, but ultimately they are bystanders, like football fans. Berlusconi’s control of his parties, from *Forza Italia* to the *Pdl*, is also reminiscent of a professional sports team, with the coach, Berlusconi, ultimately having absolute authority over who plays, the tactics to be used, etc. This very model was borrowed from the fan clubs of Milan, where supporters were and are enthusiastic, yet officially passive (i.e. no decision making authority) backers of the team.

The portrayal of Berlusconi as a modernizer of Milan, and implicitly a savior, responsible for the team’s resurrection, should not be underestimated when analyzing his 1994 electoral success. Between 1986 and 1994, Berlusconi, by most accounts heavily involved with decisions surrounding the team, helped Milan to win sixteen major domestic and international competitions, while also increasing the team’s revenue. This success came through an exciting brand of football that was in stark contrast to Italy’s traditionally conservative football style, and was surrounded by an aura of spectacle, perhaps best exemplified by Berlusconi’s 1986 introduction of new players: three helicopters landed on the team’s home field, to the soundtrack of Wagner’s *Ride of the Valkyries* and the applause of an estimated ten-thousand supporters. The event was broadcast live on one of Berlusconi’s television channels.⁴⁵

That all professional football players and most fans are male in Italy adds a gendered weight to Berlusconi’s sporting portrayal of himself. Italian women do understand football and many are avid supporters of teams. Yet the overwhelming masculine weight of football culture in

⁴³ In one of the earliest, and still best, studies of Berlusconi’s use of metaphors, Elena Semino and Michela Masci found that among some of his earliest and most important speeches, football metaphors outnumbered war metaphors (by almost a two-to-one margin) and biblical ones (by almost four-to-one). Elena Semino and Michela Masci, “Politics is Football: Metaphor in the Discourse of Silvio Berlusconi in Italy.” *Discourse & Society* 1996 vol. 7 (2): 243-269.

⁴⁴ Porro & Russo, 361-362.

⁴⁵ D’Anna and Moncalvo, 165.

Italy makes Berlusconi's soccer acumen another part of his "normal guy" persona. Berlusconi's male soccer identity and often sexist language, however, has not prevented him from being popular among the female public in Italy, especially with housewives, among his most consistent supporters and some of the heaviest consumers of his television. His success with women, however, should not be explained solely in terms of television consumption. Instead, as Parotto has noted, attention should also be given to Berlusconi's "femininity," at least in respect to traditional gendered categorizations of leisure time.⁴⁶ Below I discuss this dual nature of Berlusconi's gender relations: the normal, virile, archetype of the Italian male crossed with the talented housewife heavily involved in the family, home decoration, and gardening.

Berlusconi's self-representation as a *donnaio*, or womanizer, has been present throughout his career. The nature of this discourse has been mostly stable over time, though the more recent, well-publicized sexual escapades of Berlusconi represent a decline in the discretion surrounding his sexual narrative, which in the past was more thoroughly veiled in gallantry. Berlusconi's own femininity, and his celebration of these qualities, is also a more recently publicized phenomenon. Both the sexually explicit and feminine strands of Berlusconi's discourse parallel changes in Italian media content itself — the loss of sexual modesty in television and print, combined with a focus on reality content — and in popular notions of Italian masculinity — an increasing "metrosexualization" of the Italian male.

Stefano Fiore has provided two useful examples of Berlusconi's earlier rhetoric of womanizing. In puncturing the magnate's self-reported past, Fiore has noted Berlusconi's accounts of his time in Paris as particularly emblematic of his self-mythologizing. The following is only an excerpt of Berlusconi's romantic tale of his brief time with a young Parisian:

...Allora con questa qua sono andato a spasso un po' per Parigi. Cinque o sei giorni. Poi, quando uno dice la sfortuna, arriva un telegramma che trasferisce suo padre in Asia. Anche lei il giorno dopo deve partire. L'ultimo pomeriggio la porto al Bois de Boulogne. Facevo canottaggio ed ero campione italiano studentesco con il CUS di Milano. Mi metto a petto nudo per mostrare i miei muscoli. Lei si sloga una caviglia correndo. C'era lo sciopero dei metrò. Me la portai in braccio per qualche chilometro fino all'Étoile...La deposito su una panchina. Avevo visto un bellissimo mazzo di rose fuori dal negozio di un fioraio, la lasciai un attimo, corsi al negozio ed entrai. Le rose costavano il triplo di quello che avevo in tasca. Ma non potevo portare tre rose. Fortuna nella sfortuna, la moglie del fiorista era italiana, le diedi i miei centocinquanta franchi e mi fece credito della differenza. Presi le rose, vi misi dentro la ragazza, cioè la incorporai dentro le rose, la presi in braccio e la baciai. La porto a casa sua. Spinsi la porta. La chiusi sul mio amore, sulle rose, su tutto.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Parotto, 85.

⁴⁷ "...So with this one I went around Paris a bit. Five or six days. Then, as luck would have it, a telegram arrived indicating that her father would be transferred to Asia by his employer. She too would have to leave the next day. The last afternoon I take her to Bois de Boulogne. I was a rower and was the Italian student champion with Milan university. I take my shirt off to show her my muscles. She sprains an ankle running. There was a subway strike. I carried her in my arms for some kilometers, until the Etoile...I put her down on a bench. I had seen a beautiful bouquet of rose outside a florist's, I left her for a moment, ran to the florist and went in. The roses cost triple what I had in my pockets. But I couldn't just take three roses. As luck would have it, the wife of the florist was Italian, I gave her my 15- francs and bought the rest on credit. I took the roses, put the girl "inside," that I surrounded her with the rose, gathered her in my arms, and I kissed her. I take her to her house. I opened the door. I closed on my love, on the roses, on everything." (approximate translation mine) Fiore, 25. Originally in D'Anna e Moncalvo, 111.

Fiori doubts that Berlusconi was ever a rowing champion, but clearly, in this case, factuality is not of primary significance. Berlusconi recounted this anecdote to a group of recently graduated Masters students at Arcore, his home near Milan, in 1989. With these students of communication, it is not clear why Berlusconi felt the need to share such a romantic story, which Fiore aptly, and astutely, describes as a “Harmony” story after the series of trash romance novels of the same name.⁴⁸ But Berlusconi’s self-positioning as a gallant hero is typical of his discourse, and here too, as we have seen in the cases of television, football, and politics, Berlusconi is there to rescue a damsel in distress. Also of note here is the functional role of the French woman who, after immediately being indirectly reduced to one in a series (“questa qua”), serves as a passive vessel for Berlusconi’s charms and heroics, which include physical beauty, athletic ability, and an aesthetic romanticism (the woman and the roses seem to become one in his arms). Finally, Berlusconi’s gifts as a story teller, and aforementioned emphasis on images, are apparent here in the story’s last line with the symbolic closing of Love’s door.

After this story, Berlusconi shared more of his purported Parisian life with the students:

Ho messo su una mia agenzia turistica per tutti gli studenti della Sorbona...Portavamo in giro gli studenti italiani, li portavamo in certi tipi di night, li tenevamo su tutta la notte e alla mattina li portavamo alla Madeleine a sentire la “Messa delle passeggiatrici”. Quindi li aiutavamo a redimersi dopo avergli fatto vivere la vita di peccato della capitale, che allora era veramente di peccato nella maniera più totale. Qualche mese dopo, mio padre seppe che convivevo con una spogliarellista che faceva lo strip in rue Pigalle 33, in un posto che si chiamava “Le Grand Jeu”.⁴⁹

I have included this quote to underline the continuity present in Berlusconi’s representation of his sexual self. Here too, as in recent years, he is not only romance and roses, but also parties and prostitutes. These two identities, in and of themselves, are not mutually exclusive, but one would seem to overshadow the other along gendered lines. Berlusconi’s more sexually explicit reveling can be portrayed as secondary to admirers of his gallantry (generally women), while admirers of his more carnal lifestyle (mostly men) can relegate his romantic qualities to the background of their mental projection of him.

Amalia Signorelli has discussed the more illicit Berlusconi in terms of women consumed sexually. Arguing that his machismo is novel, in relation to traditional “Latin lovers,” in its emphasis on the quantity of women that have performed for him, rather than a focus on his own physical exploits, Signorelli posits this sexual use of women as representative of Berlusconi’s, and contemporary Italy’s, larger obsession with consumption. In the sexual marketplace, just like in other aspects of life, goods, in this case women, can be bought and sold.⁵⁰ There is no doubt that the quantity of women Berlusconi has sexually engaged is an important part of his sexual persona. When he was accused of involvement with a prostitute in 2009, his lawyer rebutted “Berlusconi has great respect for the feminine world and does not need to pay 2000 euros for a

⁴⁸ Fiore, 26

⁴⁹ Fiori, 25-26. Originally in D’Anna e Moncalvo, 331

⁵⁰ Amalia Signorelli. “Le ambigue pari opportunità e il nuovo maschilismo.” *Berlusconismo: Analisi di un sistema di potere*. Eds. Paul Ginsborg and Enrica Asquer (Rome: La Terza, 2011), 215-216.

girl; he could have great quantities of them for free.”⁵¹ But Signorelli overstates her case in painting Berlusconi’s machismo as one of quantity and not performative quality. Physical performance, of any type, is an important part of Berlusconi’s public projection of himself, as evidenced in his emphasis on his skills as a dancer, soccer player, rowing champion, and generally healthy man.⁵² More specifically, his body is a constant focus of attention of not only himself, but of the Italian media in general. To argue that Berlusconi’s sexual abilities are therefore not a primary component of his machismo would seem to ignore his wider representation of himself. Just one anecdote, of what I am sure are many, to support my claim: when Berlusconi was seen outside a Milan club in the early morning in 2008, he quipped: “if I sleep three hours, I’ll have the energy to make love for another three.”⁵³ Finally, quality and quantity are part and parcel of the generic Latin lover. This persona, at least in his own mind, sleeps around because he can, because he is repeatedly desired, and certainly not because he is lousy in bed. These points help to better contextualize Signorelli’s points: quantity certainly is a factor of in Berlusconi’s sexual image; but it is tied to his sexual performance, in-line with traditional macho stereotypes and his own self-representation as a successful and talented performer in various spheres of life.

The real novelties in Berlusconi’s sex life are his lack of discretion and the media’s willingness to put the stories on the front page. These two aspects of Berlusconi’s sexual projection of himself are related, and play into his wider framing of himself as somewhat normal. When Berlusconi makes an apparently offhand remark involving women, for example telling the Albanian prime minister to stop clandestine immigration from Albania to Italy, except for beautiful women, his lack of tact is intentional.⁵⁴ Such remarks remove Berlusconi from the dull area of political decorum and put him into the media cycle, where the criticism of his comments by elites endears his performance to supporters: he is just having fun, saying what we really feel, etc. In this case, women, like soccer, become a means to connect to supporters on their own terms. This dynamic is an example of the double-edged sword of political correctness in political communication. Too much rigidity and policing of content makes discourses geared towards emotions and everyday existence more attractive, no matter how oversimplified they may be.

Beyond these characterizations of Berlusconi’s sexual behavior, domestic and foreign media have focused much of their attention on his public pronouncements concerning women. In general, Berlusconi’s formal presentations pay ambiguous lip-service to the idea of gender equality, as exemplified by his positioning of numerous women in important political positions within his and other regional or local governments after his 2008 election, while his more spontaneous statements envision women as a fairer sex that should leverage its physical and emotional charms for gain. One of the most discussed examples of this latter behavior occurred during the 2008 election campaign. On the RAI program *Punto di vista* (“Point of View”), a

⁵¹ Danielle Hipkins, “Whore-ocracy’: Show Girls, the Beauty Trade-Off, and Mainstream Oppositional Discourse in Contemporary Italy.” *Italian Studies* 66, no. 3 (2011): 413-430. Originally in Peter Gomez, Marco Lillo and Marco Travaglio, *Papi: uno scandalo politico* (Milan: Chiarelettere, 2009), 68.

⁵² Berlusconi’s references to his early days in a band with friend Fedele Confalonieri repeatedly mention his leaving the stage to dance. In *Una storia italiana*, and repeatedly in the press, Berlusconi’s health, and more specifically his body, shown as fit, has been a constant topic of conversation.

⁵³ Pierfranco Pellizzetti. *Fenomenologia di Berlusconi* (Rome: Manifestolibri, 2009), 86-87.

⁵⁴ Paola Di Caro. “Berlusconi scherzo sugli sbarchi: dall’Albania solo belle ragazze.” *Corriere della Sera*, February 13, 2010.

http://archiviostorico.corriere.it/2010/febbraio/13/Berlusconi_scherza_sugli_sbarchi_dall_co_8_100213033.shtml

young woman explained to Berlusconi the bleak prospects Italian youth faced, especially young women increasingly dependent on temporary and poorly compensated work; he responded that there really was not a problem, since as a young and attractive woman she should try to marry the son of a billionaire, maybe his own.⁵⁵

Berlusconi's treatment of women and his self-portrayal as a Don Juan well-aligns with other aspects of his personal narrative. As in business and football, Berlusconi is successful with women; as in his treatment of politics, the language used to describe his activities is simple. The mixing of discourses that occurs in his other rhetorics is less clear when discussing gender issues, however. Berlusconi's mother is treated with the same reverence and narrative positioning as a saint, but other women are not completely represented as adversaries or objectives to be conquered or accomplished. By almost all accounts, including his own, Berlusconi does not explicitly relegate these women to notches on his belt, maintaining positive, and seemingly sincere, relationships with them. For Signorelli, this is another example of the market mentality of Berlusconi, where his companions represent a type of business partner, to be rewarded after a mutually profitable undertaking. This framing also, however, somewhat misses the mark. Berlusconi may indeed treat his sexual companions in ways that are reminiscent of appropriate business decorum. But Berlusconi projects himself in this light with almost all women that will accept his gallantry. In this sense, almost all women, not just the women he sleeps with, are means for Berlusconi to express his noble and romantic ideal of himself. This also seems to be the case with much of Berlusconi's dealings with men. Those that will accept his support and friendship are continually rewarded; those that refuse are castigated and shut out.

Berlusconi does seem to represent, then, a perverse form of gender equality. He also literally embodies this idea. His focus on female beauty is mirrored in his preoccupation with his own body, a well-publicized aspect of his persona.⁵⁶ Such concern has involved hair transplants and plastic surgery, as well as acute attention to diet. At the same time, he has also made much of his household organization and decoration, elements stereotypically associated with women in Italy. While this "domestic" Berlusconi appears to be somewhat of a novelty, his emphasis on his body and his appearance is in line with the corporal symbolism present in the relationship between many important leaders and their followers or subjects, though Berlusconi's specific means of this emphasis on his body might be specific to his case.⁵⁷ In societies guided by absolute rulers, the body of the leader has often been seen as a symbol for the State. Christianity has also assigned symbolic significance to bodies. With its Catholic heritage and Fascist legacy, these symbolic notions are strong in Italy, and appear to be relevant to considerations of Berlusconi's political rhetoric.⁵⁸ His emphasis on corporal symbolism, including sexual virility, thus appears to continue Italian political and religious traditions that are most easily recognized in Mussolini and Christian doctrine, but that have also been present in the idealization of Garibaldi, among others.

⁵⁵ Signorelli, 213.

⁵⁶ Parotto, 49-90.

⁵⁷ Parotto, 49-55.

⁵⁸ I briefly discuss these ideas at greater length in Chapter 3. In the Italian case Sergio Luzzato, has explored the symbolic importance of Mussolini's body during, and after the *ventennio* in his *The Body of Il Duce* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2005), originally published as *Il corpo del duce* (Turin: Einaudi, 1998).

Televised Fiction

His 2001 election represents Berlusconi's real, sustained ascension to official political power. After his brief government of 1994, he spent the rest of the 1990s perfecting his political apparatus in opposition. The Italian fiction industry somewhat shadowed this trajectory. While in its early years the Italian public broadcaster, RAI, was a noted producer of high-quality "*sceneggiati*," or ambitious mini-series inspired by well-known literary and theatrical texts, it was only in the mid-1990s that it, and its competitor, Berlusconi's Mediaset, began consistently to produce relatively high-quality, serial fictional content on their own terms, and to reduce a significant use of foreign imports that had begun in the 1980s. After fits and starts, the televised fiction industry matured in the 1990s, becoming fairly well established by the early 2000s. This development transformed the production of fictional programs from a type of ad-hoc sector to a functional business replete with its own production companies, facilities, writers, and other staff. In other words, televised Italian fiction slowly became its own distinct industry, as opposed to a poor step-child of Italian cinema. Looking at this important culture industry as it matured offers interesting opportunities to study trends in its narrative development in parallel to the development of Berlusconi's political narratives. Here I offer a brief overview of televised fiction in Italy from the medium's inception in 1954 to 2008, the last year of my analysis. This summary is divided into three general periods, which somewhat overlap, since they do not correspond to fixed chronological limits: the age of the *sceneggiato*, from 1954 to the mid-1980s; the wild west era of private television, from the mid-1970s to the early 1990s; the period of establishment and consolidation of the domestic Italian fiction industry, from the early 1990s to 2008.

The Sceneggiato

The *sceneggiato* has been relatively understudied in the United States, yet marks an important facet of the early pedagogical efforts of the RAI and an important aspect of postwar Italian popular culture. Over time the *sceneggiato* evolved from live transmission — a type of televised theatre — to big budget colossal co-productions reminiscent — in intent, if not in scope — of the blockbuster films currently in vogue in Hollywood. The *sceneggiati* typically ran between 2 and 6 episodes, and were derived from texts of classical literature and theatre — usually Italian but often French, English, or Russian pieces as well. The emphasis in these programs was a pedagogical messaging delivered through approachable productions of classic texts, initially focused on standout works of the nineteenth century, though increasingly open to more contemporary and earlier periods as well. The Italian public was thus exposed to televised editions of works such as Manzoni's *Promessi sposi* (*The Betrothed*), as well as interpretations of Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, Homer's *Odyssey*, and other classic texts of the Italian, European, and to a lesser degree, American cultural traditions.⁵⁹

While certainly not art-house cinema, it would be wrong to dismiss the *sceneggiati* as cultural "popcorn." In a monograph dedicated to these pedagogical mini-series, Oreste De Fornari has offered a loose categorization of texts that range from manipulative melodrama to semi-films in terms of overall quality. Personal and impressionistic, De Fornari's grouping of *sceneggiati* into types of schools headed by emblematic directors is nonetheless useful as a

⁵⁹ Anna Lucia Natale. *Reinventare la tradizione: novità e ripetizione nella fiction tv in Italia* (Florence: Mediascape, 2004), 23-48; Aldo Grasso. *Storia della televisione italiana* (Milan: Garzanti, 2000), IX-18.

means to pry-open what is often regarded as a monolithic block of programming. As De Fornari notes, within this overarching complex of pedagogical “classicisim” existed elements of nuance and discretion, such as director Anton Giulio Majano’s melodramatic adjustments to contemporary adaptations or fellow director Sandro Bolchi’s austere commitment to by-the-letter productions of *I promessi sposi* (1968) and similar classics.⁶⁰

The cultural specificity of the *sceneggiato* becomes apparent when compared to the popular cinema of the time, which was often dedicated to generalist comedy and romance. In this comparison, the pedagogical intent of the RAI becomes apparent. This cultural policing, with the moral guidelines and censorship — sometimes self-imposed — that it brought to program production, may partially explain, in addition to the visual limitations of the television of the time — the lesser appeal of *sceneggiati* to notable Italian actors and directors, many of whom, however, made appearances in such programs early, or later, in their careers. Emblematic in this last regard is Roberto Rossellini, who ended his career producing dramatized accounts of Italian, European, and biblical history for the RAI. Though technically these productions do not enter into the category of the *sceneggiato*, being films (meant for consumption in a single airing) as opposed to mini-series, based on historical figures or events, and not specific literary or theatrical texts, and made with less explicitly pedagogical intent, they are worth noting here as further evidence of RAI’s wider emphasis on combining pedagogy, quality, and history — literary or otherwise — in the years of its monopoly of broadcast television in Italy.

While these productions eventually gave way to less literary and less pedagogical fictional programs in the face of increasing competition from foreign imports and other forms of televised entertainment (game shows, sports, etc.) in the 1980s, the traces of their presence in Italian fiction production can still be seen in the biblical titles that are constant fixtures in Italian programming, with their dramatization of the events and key figures of the Christian text, and in the fairly heavy moralizing and “*buonista*” stories of successful programs like *Don Matteo*, wherein a humble priest offers moral and civic lessons on his way to solving crimes that baffle local police.

Private Television and Fiction

The *sceneggiato* became less prominent in the Italian television landscape after the advent of private television in the peninsula in the mid-1970s. As local broadcasters proliferated, there was an urgent need for content to fill their schedules. Pirated and purchased copies of Italian and often American films were often the content of choice for such broadcasters, which would later turn to more serial foreign productions, especially American ones, in order to more efficiently fill their schedules and capture viewers’ attention. By the time Berlusconi consolidated private broadcasting into his three national networks, much of this serial programming could be categorized into three general types: Japanese cartoons, American series, and Latin American telenovelas, a form of soap opera with a closed, i.e. predetermined, narrative ending (as opposed to a traditional American soap opera, based on an open narrative that, in theory, ends only when the program is cancelled). Since private broadcasters were prohibited from broadcasting live news programs until the early 1990s, much of private television content was based solely on entertainment. Fictional programs were certainly a part of this escapist programming, with much of the fictional content of Berlusconi’s networks, particularly imported

⁶⁰ Oreste De Fornari. *Teleromanza. Mezzo secolo di sceneggiati & fiction* (Edizioni Falsopiano, 2012).

American series, such as *Dallas*, focusing on the intimate, private dynamics of glamorized protagonists, or the spectacular adventures of super heroes like the *A-Team* or *Knight Rider* (*Supercar* in Italian). Shows somewhat more engaged with social issues, such as *The Cosby Show* (*I Robinson*), were also popular in Italy at the time, but the large bulk of programs dedicated to social issues was concentrated in RAI programming, continuing, to a degree, the broadcaster's role as a public service provider.

A notable entrant into the Italian programming of this period was the sitcom, which in some ways should be seen as emblematic of both the new programming of Berlusconi's private networks, and the new Italy, built around consumption, that emerged in Italy in the 1980s. Sitcoms were, and are, generally set in urban or suburban areas, built around families, highlight the home as the privileged space of personal development (or lack thereof) and affection, and consistently resolve problems with good faith and humor. While not an exact stand-in for the later politics of Berlusconi, the sitcom should be seen in some ways as symptomatic of the new Italy his television helped to bring about, and of the politics that he would later promote: a mix of the old (the family and domestic space as privileged aspects of identity) and the new (a somewhat superficial optimism laced with unsophisticated humor). The same should also be said for the serial nature of the imported fictional programs that came to the fore in Italy in the 1980s.

The open series format of successful American imports, with regularly occurring episodes dividing an open, potentially infinite macro-narrative into episodes with individual narrative closure, offers viewers structured familiarity with regularly scheduled doses of the new: each week the protagonists, structure, and setting of the story are the same, but with specific changes to program content. Berlusconi's self-presentation as a politician appears to mirror this paradigm. His hammering home of specific messages ("*Meno tasse per tutti*," etc.) through formulaic repetition is reminiscent of traditional political propaganda, and much of the advertising prevalent on his networks in the 1980s and 1990s, but his ability to repeatedly capture audience attention through new media events represents the new that is part of the familiar-new binary structure of serial programming. Much of Berlusconi's success in not only capturing, but retaining, media and voter attention should be seen as resulting from this dynamic. He has repeatedly been able to establish his brand, to use an apt term from advertising, and build from this base through unorthodox political moves that garner media attention. Successful serial programming similarly offers a clear and familiar identity to viewers through character stability and repetitive narrative structure, but prevents viewer boredom by offering small innovations or new dramatic story elements in each episode. The same importance of serial programming to contemporary content providers — a relatively economical way to promote viewer loyalty and brand recognition — is thus also present in contemporary politicians' attempts to stay prominent in the apparently infinite mediasphere of postmodern societies.

"Normalcy" and Success

After a production crisis in the first half of the 1990s, which saw national output fall to 128 hours and 40 minutes during the 1995-1996 season, a contemporary low, Italian televised fiction grew substantially, in terms of hours of content, through 2007.⁶¹ This increase in not only

⁶¹ The first figure comes from Fania Petrocchi, "La stagione di fiction '95-'96," in *Il senso del luogo: La fiction italiana, L'Italia nella fiction, anno ottavo*. Ed. Milly Buonanno (Rome: RAI-ERI, 1997), 37. The second figure is from Fabrizio Lucherini, "Una fase di consolidamento. Analisi della stagione 2007-2008," in *Se vent'anni sembran pochi: La fiction italiana, l'Italia nella fiction, anni ventesimo e ventunesimo*. Ed. Milly Buonanno (Rome: RAI-ERI, 2010), 3.

general fictional programming (such as television movies and mini-series), but serial programming as well (series and serials), was in part due to legislation that increased the profit potential of independent television producers and which favored the broadcasting of Italian or European fiction in Italy. Italian law 122 of 1998 established production and programming quotas for national broadcasters, requiring a minimum of Italian and/or European programs to be included in broadcasters' schedules.⁶²

In qualitative terms, this increase in production included the development of shows, such as *Il maresciallo Rocca* and *Il commissario Montalbano*, each discussed later in this dissertation, that have since become well-known referents of Italian popular culture. Aside from the success of these and other crime fiction programs, a significant amount of Italian television schedules has been dedicated to productions featuring religious figures, especially biopics dedicated to important members of the Catholic Church, such as Padre Pio and Pope John Paul II (programs dedicated to these figures are also discussed later in this dissertation). At the same time, both RAI and Mediaset have turned towards more "normal" protagonists in their respective programming, with average middle-class heroes continuing to assume the bulk of narrative responsibility through the late 2000s. While most of these heroes have been male and Italian, women, though not foreigners, have been increasingly cast as principal protagonists of Italian fictional programming.⁶³

An important sign of the vitality of Italian fiction could be seen in the development of its own proto-star system during the period in question. In the early 1990s, successful programs were often built around stars from other cultural sectors, such as film or theater, including Nino Manfredi, Gigi Proietti, and Stefania Sandrelli, among others. Beginning in the 2000s, however, the televised fiction industry has been recognized as a developer of young talent, including the brief television stints of Riccardo Scamarcio and Elio Germano, both of whom have migrated to stardom in Italian cinema.⁶⁴

The televised fiction industry in Italy has thus come full circle: initially looked down upon by stars of other cultural sectors, it now produces, reinvigorates, and extends the careers of icons of Italian popular culture, on both a fictional and real plane. Given the quantitative and qualitative importance of these televised fiction programs, it is not hyperbole to call the most important heroes of these texts icons. In a society still heavily dependent on television for entertainment and information (and of course, "infotainment"), especially in the period considered here, 2000-2008, the fictional or dramatized characters of these programs and the performers that give life to them become important symbols of specific values or historical moments in Italian culture, symbols that consequently recirculate through the various outlets of the Italian mediasphere: tabloids, talk shows, popular cinema, etc. This cultural, and ultimately political, as I discuss throughout this dissertation, importance of these stars, in addition to the televised fiction industry's somewhat parallel development to Berlusconi's own political-cultural career, is why I have chosen the heroes of Italy's most important serial television programs, mini-series, and TV-movies as comparative examples to Berlusconi's political protagonism on the Italian stage. As I will show in subsequent chapters, Berlusconi and these pop cultural protagonists have often mirrored each other in the contours of their heroics, though they often

⁶² Enrico Menduni. *Televisione e società italiana, 1975-2000* (Milan: Bompiani, 2002), 183.

⁶³ Anna Maria Natale. "L'Italia nella fiction" in Buonanno, 1997, and "Umani, troppo umani. Gli eroi dell'immaginario" in Buonanno, 2010.

⁶⁴ Rizzello, Filippo. "Lo star system della fiction" in Buonanno, 2010.

diverge from each other in important ways, as seen in my three case studies of the election and television seasons of 2000-2001, 2005-2006, and 2007-2008.

With these respective “backstories” — Gramsci, Berlusconi, Italian televised fiction — now complete, we can begin to explore how they work together to produce some tension and nuance in our understanding of where Berlusconi fits between politics and popular culture. For the purposes of this narrative, our story begins in the 2000-2001 election and television seasons, as described in Chapter 2.

Chapter 2

Introduction

This chapter focuses on fictional television programs and campaign materials from the 2000-2001 election and television seasons. In keeping with the wider goals of my research on Berlusconi, my analysis privileges his characterization of himself and the problems facing Italy, and the relation of these characterizations to their fictional counterparts in relevant television programs. I also explore the relevant characterizations of Berlusconi's 2001 opponent, Francesco Rutelli, hoping to draw out those aspects of the Berlusconi campaign that were particularly "Berlusconian." These findings are then contextualized in a broader consideration of the relationship between popular culture and politics, with an emphasis on the relevant thoughts of political and cultural theorist Antonio Gramsci. Building on Gramsci, I then briefly explore the relationship between politics and popular culture in Italy since its unification, attempting to provide historical context to Berlusconi's contemporary behavior.

To engage both spheres on equal terms, I treat both political campaigns and the relevant fictional texts as narratives. While in the latter case this is mostly a straightforward operation, it is somewhat more complicated in the former. Campaign narratives do not come in finite formats that clearly delineate a beginning and an end, or even what should be considered as part of the narrative. Yet political commentators repeatedly speak to the need for candidates to stay on message, follow the script, or otherwise adhere to the overarching narrative of their campaigns. In performing such operations, election bids, like the stories of popular culture, take inputs from the societies that surround them, and output an interpretation of at least part of that society. These interpretations, meant to convey a specific message, are often, like a traditional narrative, built around a hero that resolves a problem. As a consequence, in analyzing political and fictional narratives — the former which I piece together through close analysis of several primary texts and the relevant contextualization taken from secondary sources — I focus on the protagonists and the problems of the given narratives. In this way it is possible to understand which heroes, or heroic qualities, appeal to a public in a given season, and which problems seem to be pressing, to either the cultural producer or the consumer, or both.

While I provide a full unpacking of my findings in the course of this chapter, my primary points are as follows: both political and fictional narratives in 2000-2001 worked to reinforce "conservative" thinking and encourage an othering of significant political and social problems, such as the role of the State in society and the acceptance of immigrants. "Conservative" here does not refer to rightist ideology, but rather to existing "truths" that voters and viewers take for granted. In assessing these "truths," which I later discuss in relation to Gramsci's notion of common sense, voters and viewers push onto others the responsibility for a given problem, ignoring their own, even if partial, implication. To resolve these issues, Berlusconi's opponent in 2000-2001, former mayor of Rome Francesco Rutelli, tended to propose "choral," or collaborative, group solutions. Berlusconi paid lip service to the idea of group effort in his campaign, but ultimately portrayed himself as a type of superman: a multi-talented, and recurring hero that could save Italy. In casting himself as such an exceptional figure, Berlusconi diverged from the heroic norm of 2000-2001 fictional protagonists. These figures, regardless of age or profession, were mostly characterized as humble, down-to-earth, apparently "normal" heroes, a description that could also be applied to Rutelli's self-portrayal. The fictional narratives, for the most part, utilized single protagonists, as opposed to "choral" protagonism.

I apply these aforementioned considerations to the campaigns' and programs' specific treatment of perceived problems, namely large institutions, such as the State, and foreigners, and argue that all three groups of narratives — Berlusconi's, Rutelli's, the fictional programs' — encourage an anti-State mentality and othering of foreigners that is largely in-line with small-state and individual-centric liberal ideology. In a deeper, more chronological context, the degree and particular type of Berlusconi's fusion of politics and popular culture has notable, though few, antecedents in Italian culture, and may not be replicated anytime soon. Below, I outline the texts and Gramscian framework that brought me to these conclusions.

Texts

My findings result from the analysis of important fictional and political texts of the 2000-2001 season. The tables that follow offer a description of the key texts of my sample.

*Television*⁶⁵:

Title:	Channel: ⁶⁶	Aired:	Audience: ⁶⁷ (millions)	Share (%): ⁶⁸	Summary:
<i>Padre Pio: tra cielo e terra</i>	RAI Uno	Nov. 12,13, 2000	13.123	42.55-44.88	The life of Franciscan monk Padre Pio is followed from his literal stigmatization in 1918 until his beatification in 1999.
<i>Una storia qualunque</i>	RAI Uno	Nov. 19, 20, 2000	9.897	31.99-37.01	A senior-citizen befriends a lawyer who helps him to reunite with his children and prove his innocence in an alleged crime.
<i>Il maresciallo Rocca</i>	RAI Uno	March 4, 11, 18, 25, 2001	9.248	31.63-37.00	In addition to familial problems related to adoption, marriage, children, and later the death of his wife, Rocca takes on cases

⁶⁵ The following statistics were taken from Program Index of *Per voce sola e coro: La fiction italiana; L'Italia nella fiction*. Ed. Milly Buonanno (Rome: RAI, 2002), 221-222 (*Pio*); 223-224 (*Una storia*); 315-318 (*Rocca*); 327-329 (*Montalbano*); 247-248 (*Uno Bianca*); 249-250 (*Piccolo mondo antico*).

⁶⁶ During the time period in question, the primary national television channels in Italy were the public RAI Uno, RAI Due, and RAI Tre, and Berlusconi's Mediaset channels: Canale 5, Rete 4, and Italia Uno. The flagship channels, generally reserved for the most anticipated mainstream productions were, and are, Rai Uno and Canale 5, respectively.

⁶⁷ "Audience" refers to the average number of viewers for a given program in the season.

⁶⁸ "Share" refers to the percentage of all Italian television viewers that were watching a given program during its airing.

					involving kidnapping, military hazing, and, in the two-part finale, an organized crime ring.
<i>Il commissario Montalbano</i>	RAI Due	May 9, 16, 2001	6.834	23.75-29.65	In the season's two episodes, Montalbano resolves, respectively, two murders connected to Mafia organ trafficking and a suicide and an execution linked by family ties, love, and jealousy.
<i>Uno Bianca</i>	Canale 5	February 5, 6, 2001	9.045	28.93-34.98	Inspired by historical events, <i>Uno bianca</i> follows the exploits of a local policeman that infiltrates the gang of corrupt of law enforcement figures and ultimately brings its members to justice.
<i>Piccolo mondo antico</i>	Canale 5	February 13, 15, 2001	7.026	23.85-28.01	Drawn from the Fogazzaro novel of the same name, the mini-series follows Franco, a noble liberal from Lombardy, as he fights familial intrigue and loss while working towards Italian independence in the 1850s.

Politics:

<u>Item:</u>	<u>Summary:</u>
Prominent political posters of Silvio Berlusconi and his opponent Francesco Rutelli	Hoping to skirt official limits on campaigning generally, and the use of television specifically, Berlusconi began to cover Italian cities with a series of posters in July of 2000. Once selected as the center-left candidate in late 2000, Rutelli began to do the same.

<p>Berlusconi's phone call to the television program "Raggio verde"</p>	<p>After several television programs of the state broadcaster, RAI, skewered Berlusconi for his conflicts of interest and uncertain business dealings, Berlusconi ordered his coalition members to boycott RAI programming. During a live broadcast of the program <i>Raggio verde</i> ("Green Ray"), Berlusconi phoned into the show to lambaste Santoro and other RAI personalities for their alleged biased programming and poor public service.</p>
<p>Berlusconi's signing of the "Contract with Italians" on national television</p>	<p>On May 8, 2001, several days before the 2001 election, Berlusconi appeared on the talk show <i>Porta a porta</i> ("Door to Door") and signed, in the presence of a notary, his Contract with the Italians, live on national television. In the contract, Berlusconi promised not to run for office in the future if his coalition, once elected, failed to reach four out of the contract's five promises.</p>
<p>Berlusconi's and Rutelli's reactions to the accusations of corruption and illicit business activity made by <i>The Economist</i> and other foreign publications against Berlusconi</p>	<p>On April 26, 2001, the British magazine <i>The Economist</i> issued a cover story outlining why Berlusconi was unfit to lead Italy. This denunciation was followed by similar accusations made by other foreign publications such as <i>El Mundo</i> and <i>Le Monde</i>. Berlusconi was dismissive of these critiques, and accused the publications of being aligned with the Italian left. Rutelli jumped on the foreign bandwagon and used their attacks as validation of his own critique of Berlusconi.</p>
<p>Berlusconi's "biography," <i>Una storia italiana</i> ("An Italian Story")</p>	<p>Several weeks prior to the May election, Berlusconi paid for the sending of this glossy magazine, heavy on pictures and sprinkled with first- and third-person accounts of Berlusconi's life and political philosophy, to all Italian families. The magazine outlines Berlusconi's rise from childhood to entrepreneur to political leader.</p>

Protagonists

The characterizations of a protagonist in political and fictional discourse can take on numerous hues. The kind-hearted, or mean-spirited, can also be miserly, happy-go-lucky, etc. Here, to avoid an overly broad description of every characteristic of every protagonist of my sample, I have focused on those principal character traits that are either present in the majority of my sample texts, or significant, core elements of a given “hero’s” characterization. This focus means that some elements of multi-faceted characters, including Berlusconi, do not receive critical attention here. This is regrettable, but ultimately more conducive to an insightful consideration of the principal traits of the protagonists of my sample. With these considerations in mind, my review of the electoral “character portraits” of Berlusconi and his opponent, Francesco Rutelli, is outlined below, followed by brief overview of the most important protagonists of the television programs of my 2000-2001 sample.

Politics

The 2000-2001 election campaign has been described by several observers as characterized by events and personalities more than actual political programs.⁶⁹ Berlusconi sought to occupy the increasingly inattentive news cycle by performing calculatedly “spontaneous” actions that became news more for their form (an untraditional act of political attention-getting), than for their content (what he actually proposed to do if elected); Rutelli used this strategy much less than his rival, but was at times targeted by Berlusconi and his allies for his relative youth and good looks rather than his political program.⁷⁰ Hence Berlusconi’s phone call to the program *Raggio verde*, discussed below, or his decision to dine with Rupert Murdoch on the eve of the election, while concerns over his conflict-of-interest circulated through *telegiornali* and talk-shows.⁷¹ While these occasions were not the typical media events studied by Dayan and Katz — royal weddings, peace accord signings, etc. — they do approximate some of the goals, forms, and effects of such instances.⁷² For example, Dayan and Katz align two of their selected types of events — “contests” and “conquests” — with two forms of political legitimacy as outlined by Max Weber.⁷³

⁶⁹ Rolando Marini. “Tra cronaca e politica: l’agenda dei media in campagna elettorale.” In *La posta in gioco: temi, personaggi e satira nella campagna elettorale 2001*. Ed. Paolo Mancini (Rome: Carocci, 2003), 17-45. Also, Caterina Paolucci. “Campaign Strategies and Tactics: Leaders, Experts, and the Media.” In *The Italian General Election of 2001: Berlusconi’s Victory*. Ed. James Newell (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 127-142.

⁷⁰ One National Alliance poster referred to him as “Ciccio Bello,” a reference to a children’s doll of the same name and a potential term of affection between intimates. The general thrust of the term is cute, affectionate, perhaps chubby, etc.

⁷¹ Barbara Jerkov, “Murdoch vede Berlusconi.” *La Repubblica*, May 5, 2001. <http://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2001/05/05/murdoch-vede-berlusconi.html>. February 12, 2012.

⁷² Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz. *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

⁷³ Very synthetically, from p.25: “...the corpus of events can be subdivided into Contests, Conquests, and Coronations...the three...forms are dramatic embodiments of Weber’s (1946) three types of authority...rationality, charisma, and tradition are inscribed respectively in Contest, Conquest, and Coronation.” Their source text in question is *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946).

For contests, Dayan and Katz ascribe the “rational” authority described by Weber, in this case arrived at through a rule-bound competition, such as a political campaign or even a political debate. In regard to conquests, “charismatic” legitimacy is obtained by the leader that successfully completes a conquest, described as an example of an extra-human effort of will against seemingly insurmountable challenges or codified norms.⁷⁴ While Berlusconi’s 1994 “*discesa in campo*” and his later performance in a series of 2006 debates with Romano Prodi clearly exemplify types of contests, in which rational legitimacy is won through the skillful defeat of an opponent under recognized rules, the 1994 election victory, as well as other moments of Berlusconi’s electoral narrative, such as his phone call to the television program *Raggio verde* and his signing of his Contract with Italians live on national television during the 2001 campaign, are also framed as a type of conquest, an example of Berlusconi upending conventional practices in defiance of the ossified establishment that he discursively creates in his campaigns.

Such events have repeatedly been at the center of Berlusconi’s campaigns, and serve not only to confer on him the charismatic legitimacy described by Weber and later Dayan and Katz, but also allow him to occupy the “media cycle,” focusing attention on himself and his agenda, leaving opponents to fight for scraps of media attention.⁷⁵ At the same time, the mediatic repetition, if not seriality, of Berlusconi’s “events” serves as a reinforcement mechanism that repeatedly deploys the same tropes of martyrdom, outsidership, and freedom that have dominated his campaigns. Most of the important, or at least memorable, messaging of Berlusconi’s 2000-2001 campaign took place through such singular events. While Rutelli was a less capable showman, his train tour through the peninsula was similarly meant to capture the media’s attention, though in general his campaign was less eventful and more traditional in form.⁷⁶

Rutelli sought to portray his campaign as a type of underdog comeback, a narrative framing reminiscent of the crises a hero must overcome to complete his or her quest. In so doing, Rutelli attempted to build drama into his wider campaign narrative; yet the individual elements of this discourse were largely presented in a conventional way — uneventful talk show appearances, typical campaign rallies, the aforementioned and by then cliché train tour of the peninsula. By contrast, Berlusconi attempted to conduct a campaign where the ending, i.e. his presumed victory, was already known, shifting the emphasis from *if* he would succeed to *how* he would do so. In theory, such a strategy should have undermined the suspense and urgency of his campaign narrative; instead, Berlusconi managed to layer drama and theatricality into the telling, or performing, of his already concluded script. Examples of this strategy include the: crudeness of Berlusconi’s attribution of the assassination of the government labor consultant Massimo D’Antona by the new Red Brigades to “only” a settling of accounts on the left, and hence less

⁷⁴ Dayan and Katz, 25-52.

⁷⁵ Here Dayan and Katz cite Aron in describing “Conquests,” the event form of charismatic authority; it seems very fitting to the Berlusconi case: “the subject submits, in exceptional emotional states, to the heroism, sanctity or outstanding merit of an individual’s personality’ operating outside the rules.” (44). R. Aron, *German Sociology*. (London: Heinemann, 1957).

⁷⁶ Dubbed the “Rutelli Express,” the candidate’s tour through the peninsula began in Trieste and continued throughout the peninsula for the month of February, with the goal of visiting 100 Italian cities. Rutelli’s train trip followed on the heels of Romano Prodi’s 1996 campaign bus tour of the peninsula, and Berlusconi’s 2000 electoral cruise of Italy before regional elections. Umberto Rosso, “Sul binario il treno di Rutelli scatta il giro delle cento città.” *La Repubblica*, January 5, 2001. <http://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2001/01/05/sul-binario-il-treno-di-rutelli-scatta.html>

worthy of public concern than the wider climate of hate that he allegedly felt during the election campaign, as well as his decision to make an announcement on his conflict of interests only on the last day of the campaign, and only after going to dinner with Rupert Murdoch.⁷⁷ Berlusconi's decision to sign a notarized contract with the Italians live on national television and to call-in to live television programs with provocative sound bites ready for re-circulation through other media also fall under this rubric.

Berlusconi's and Rutelli's self-characterizations were somewhat different in their respective trajectories, though there were some similarities, in particular, though not exclusively, in regard to the concepts of humility and legitimacy. The former, in addition to a casual demeanor, were partially present in the Rutelli campaign. In his "environmental" poster, the candidate is shown with disheveled hair, a casual corduroy jacket, and without a tie. He appears to be caught in a spontaneous moment, grabbing a microphone as if at an impromptu street rally (and while the focus is on his face, over his shoulder we can see a blurred man, presumably just one member of the surrounding crowd that has been cropped from the photo). The overall impression of the poster is that of a natural leader, someone from the people, and for the people. The poster is tagged with the slogan "*Miglioriamo l'Italia, insieme*" ("Let's improve Italy, together"). Rutelli's "healthcare" poster also features the candidate "caught in the act," this time pressing the flesh with a group of ordinary-looking senior citizens.



Another Rutelli poster, "*L'Italia di tanti, non di pochi*" ("The Italy of many, not of the few,") likewise features the candidate surrounded by people, this time teenagers and twenty-somethings, though in a markedly posed scene. In this, and in the healthcare poster, the familiar tag line is "*Rinnoviamo l'Italia, insieme*" ("Let's renew Italy, together.") Rutelli's train tour

⁷⁷ Paola Di Caro, "Omicidio D'Antona, regolamento di conti a sinistra." *Corriere della Sera*, April 22, 2001. http://archiviostorico.corriere.it/2001/aprile/22/Omicidio_Antona_regolamento_conti_sinistra_co_0_010422144.shtml; Jerkov, "Murdoch vede Berlusconi." *la Repubblica*, May 5, 2001. <http://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2001/05/05/murdoch-vede-berlusconi.html>

through the peninsula was similarly designed to get the candidate out among the people, to meet them on superficially informal terms, though its impact appears to have been minimized after the novelty of Prodi's 1996 bus tour and Berlusconi's 2000 ship tour of the peninsula. This studied spontaneity and literal presence among the public were meant to differentiate Rutelli from Berlusconi, who sought to project an image of staid responsibility and sober leadership while simultaneously portraying himself as humble and exceptional.⁷⁸



In *Una storia italiana*, Berlusconi's new Italy is described as "humble," and he notes his respect for "the most humble" and his "sincere respect" for the "weakest" members of Italian society. He also says that he does not like to "show off" and that his score in "worldliness," here intended as a cosmopolitan social life, is "zero." These affirmations are bracketed by explicit or implicit signals of Berlusconi's exceptional ability, from his outstanding scholastic achievement as a youth (he did his fellow students homework for a fee, complete with money back guarantee in the case of a poor grade) to his passion for, and forewords to, books by Erasmus, Machiavelli, and Thomas More, and arriving at his more well-known successes in business (first with *Edilnord*, then *Fininvest*) and the AC Milan soccer team. In-sync with his campaign posters, to be discussed below, the humble and exceptional Berlusconi always appears, in *Una storia italiana*, in deliberate poses, repeatedly giving the impression of a calm and in-control figure.⁷⁹

The *Cavaliere*, in those posters where he is featured, is always framed alone and posed in a straightforward, simple position; he is dressed in a dark suit or plain dark sweater, projecting a rather boring image of normalcy and dependability. Even when shown jogging in *Una storia italiana*, Berlusconi is wearing a collared shirt and what appears to be a dark sweater.⁸⁰ This imaging was an attempt to distance Berlusconi from the impression that he was vulnerable to at times off-the-cuff, spontaneous outbursts that were not fit for a national leader.⁸¹ Such dressing of the candidate fits well with his campaign's emphasis on firm and precise language.

⁷⁸ Paolucci, 131, on Berlusconi's attempts to be seen as a stable leader.

⁷⁹ Silvio Berlusconi. *Una storia italiana* (Milan: Mondadori, 2001), 1; 7; 10-11; 27-28; 33; 42-67.

⁸⁰ *Una storia italiana*, p. 25

⁸¹ Ilvo Diamanti and Marc Lazar. "The National Elections of 13 May 2001: Chronicle of a Victory Foretold—Albeit a Little Too Soon." In *2001 Italian Politics: The Return of Berlusconi*. Eds. Paolo Bellucci and Martin Bull (Oxford: Berghen Books, 2002), 76.

In his posters, which outlined an overtaxed and unsafe Italy (themselves problems to be dealt with), Berlusconi preceded any promise in these areas (i.e. “lower taxes” or “safer cities”) with one of two lead-ins: “*un impegno concreto*.” (literally “a concrete commitment,”) or “*un impegno preciso*.” (literally “a precise commitment”).⁸² With such language, Berlusconi was not just promising lower taxes and safer cities, but also sincerity, attempting to signal that his direct and exact slogans were different from both typically hollow campaign pledges, and the convoluted language of *politichese*, or the traditional political language of Italian politicians, so bloated with words, conjunctions, and insider knowledge as to render its meaning not only difficult to grasp, but often contradictory. Berlusconi also sought to use this image of credibility to capitalize on continued disenchantment with the existing Italian political class, as seen most prominently by the signing of his Contract with the Italians live on national television.⁸³ The purpose of the Contract was less the publicizing of its specific proposals, which aimed to lower taxes while increasing security, pensions, employment, and public investment, than the positioning of Berlusconi as a credible leader able to enact the liberalizing reforms Italy needed.⁸⁴ He was not, in essence, the standard career politician or bureaucrat, i.e. those responsible for Italy’s alleged poor economic and security conditions, with their biases and lack of concern for public sentiment. To separate Berlusconi and his party *Forza Italia* from such political connotations, the party is described, in *Una storia italiana*, as the party of the sensible and well-intentioned, at odds with traditional political groups.⁸⁵



⁸² In earlier versions of this chapter I translated these slogans as, respectively, “a real commitment” and “a clear commitment.” I have reverted to the literal translations used above, however, because they give a better feeling, even if somewhat awkward in English, of the thrust of Berlusconi’s fixation with contractual-like commitments and precision, as discussed later in this paper in reference to the Contract with Italians and Berlusconi’s repeated use of statistics.

⁸³ Available, as of September 2012, at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JlcSlkWWCtg>

⁸⁴ Here it should be noted that in regard to crime Berlusconi used the contract’s crime statistics and calls for neighborhood policing to scare the electorate into a nostalgic, if perhaps fictional, remembrance of the close-knit neighborhood of yesteryear, where everyone knew everyone and everyone was safe. The contract notes that there are currently 3 million crimes annually in Italy; to reduce this number Berlusconi promises to enact his “Plan for the Defense of Citizens and the Prevention of Crime.”

⁸⁵ *Una storia italiana*, 3.

Despite his rhetoric of responsibility and sober leadership, however, Berlusconi came under attack as being unfit to lead Italy, in particular from the British magazine *The Economist*, with other European publications following suit.⁸⁶ In *The Economist's* lengthy case against Berlusconi, his alleged financial crimes and mafia ties, in addition to his notable conflicts-of-interest, were all underscored as reasons why he would make an inappropriate prime minister. In this case, for Berlusconi, foreigners were something to be derided, and dismissed as being out of touch with Italy and allied with the Italian left. This positioning showed Berlusconi's, and I would argue many Italian political elites', wider immaturity when dealing with Europe. For if Berlusconi had previously sought legitimacy for himself and his coalition through the European People's Party and political visits with European figures such as Tony Blair — and here it should also be noted that *Una storia italiana*, from its front cover forward, is filled with pictures of Berlusconi meeting with foreign dignitaries — he here reverted to an Italian provincialism that occasionally shuts out critical foreign commentary.⁸⁷ Rutelli too eagerly jumped on *The Economist* bandwagon, as if the opinion of an esteemed foreign publication were necessary to validate his own condemnation of Berlusconi's conflicts-of-interest — both medial and criminal.⁸⁸ But in jumping on the bandwagon so quickly, Rutelli was at least not hypocritical, having already sought, like Berlusconi, “external” legitimization of his candidacy: an official visit to London (Berlusconi's was informal), and, more importantly, the official backing of the only candidate to twice defeat Berlusconi in a general election (in 1996 and again in 2006), former Italian Prime Minister (and at the time President of the European Commission) Romano Prodi.⁸⁹

Each candidate, in divergent ways, thus sought external legitimation for his candidacy, while also portraying himself as either a victim (Berlusconi) or an underdog (Rutelli). Beyond his aforementioned trip to London, Berlusconi also traveled to the conference of the European People's Party (EPP) in Berlin in January of 2001, receiving the group's official acceptance and passive endorsement of *Forza Italia*; in *Una storia italiana*, this milestone is portrayed as a victory against the remains of “*cattocomunismo*”, or “cathocommunism,” the members of traditional Italian leftist or Catholic parties that had gravitated towards the popular middle after the Italian political turmoil of the early 1990s. Berlin itself is described as the “martyr city of communism” in *Una storia italiana* (109). As mentioned previously, Berlusconi also traveled to

⁸⁶ In its April 26, 2001 issue, *The Economist* cover featured a close-up of Berlusconi framed by the title “Why Silvio Berlusconi is unfit to lead Italy.” An editorial and an investigative report supplemented the cover, offering very detailed information about his alleged financial and legal misconduct. *El Mundo* (Spain) and *Le Monde* (France), among other foreign publications, followed with similar critical services on Berlusconi in the following weeks. “La prensa internacional ‘desnuda’ al candidato italiano Berlusconi.” *El Mundo*, May 1, 2001; “M. Berlusconi disqualifié.” *Le Monde*, May 2, 2001, among others.

⁸⁷ Berlusconi visited Blair in London on February 8, 2001, in part to assure the British leader of the suitability of Umberto Bossi and the Northern League as potential government partners. This date, and the other specific “foreign” dates provided for the activities of Berlusconi and Rutelli come from the election chronology found in Bellucci and Bull, 1-28. It should also be noted that images of Berlusconi posing with world leaders, including Clinton, Mitterrand, Kohl, the Pope, and numerous others, fill *Una storia italiana*.

⁸⁸ At a campaign stop in Agrigento (Sicily), Rutelli cited specific extracts from *El Mundo* e *Le Monde* to bolster his case for the European “risk” of a Berlusconi victory. Rosso, Umberto. “Rutelli contro il leader del Polo: Ormai è un caso in Europa.” *La Repubblica*, May 1, 2001.

⁸⁹ Rutelli visited London on January 29, 2001. He met with Prodi in Brussels on January 31, 2001. Felice Saulino, “Bossi peggio di Haider, il Polo non lo ferma.” *Corriere della sera*, February 1, 2001.

London to assure Tony Blair of the suitability of Umberto Bossi and the Northern League as partners in government.⁹⁰ In the process, Berlusconi obtained the sheen of foreign approval, or at least acceptance, of his coalition.

Berlusconi also sought legitimation domestically, attempting to bolster his image as a dependable leader through language meant to convey a sense of responsibility and sobriety. Beyond the aforementioned language of his posters and his Contract with the Italians, in other campaign material, notably *Una storia italiana*, Berlusconi also placed heavy emphasis on statistics, noting the precise figures of political polls and economic results, among other items.⁹¹ For example, *Forza Italia's* 1994 electoral result is given, in a descriptive paragraph in *Una storia italiana*, as 30.6% of the vote rather than “30%” or “31%.” This focus on precise and “responsible” language met its apex several days before the election, when Berlusconi signed the “Contract with Italians” on live national television. Beyond the Contract’s aforementioned language, this media event was significant because Berlusconi’s notarized signing of the Contract was an attempt to transfer to politics the alleged responsibility and determinacy of a business contract, with Berlusconi promising not to run for office in the following election if his coalition were unable to meet four of the five pledges outlined in the contract.

Rutelli likewise sought a type of legitimation during the campaign, largely due to his lack of an existing electoral base (he had been mayor of Rome, but was not the head, or even a key component, of an existing party, or the winner of any type of primary). Instead, he was chosen as the center-left candidate by the leaders of the parties of the center-left coalition, who saw him as a viable candidate against Berlusconi, largely due to his perceived telegeniality and youthful presence. As mentioned previously, Rutelli traveled to Brussels to receive the blessing of Romano Prodi, the winner of the 1996 election against Berlusconi (and who would subsequently win the 2006 Italian general election, as discussed in Chapter 3). More importantly, Rutelli also sought to earn credibility as a politician who would deliver the goods, as opposed to what his hired consultants saw as Berlusconi’s over-promising.⁹² Hence the attempt to offer more than mere slogans in his crime and healthcare posters. The former proposed the “certainty” of convictions and the aforementioned denunciations of immigrant crime and the slow pace of Italian justice, while the latter promised no co-pays, less waiting, and the aforementioned idea of “less bureaucracy, more humanity.” Of course, intentions do not equal results, and if Rutelli did seek to bolster his campaign rhetoric with specific pledges, meant to contrast with the simplistic promises of Berlusconi, it is hard to see a great difference between the proposals of the two candidates, since neither offer credible solutions to a given problem. The only substantial difference between the candidates’ promises appears to be Berlusconi’s enlightened decision to focus on short, easy soundbites, in contrast to Rutelli’s ill-advised choice to partially fill relatively small posters with a significant amount of text.

As noted above, Rutelli also sought to portray himself as an underdog, repeatedly noting the electoral gap his campaign was closing against Berlusconi’s money and media machine.⁹³ In

⁹⁰ Bellucci and Bull, 2.

⁹¹ In *Una storia italiana*, the statistics of the “judicial persecution” of Berlusconi are also detailed: 450 visits to the offices of his businesses, more than one million documents examined, including the records of 150 checking accounts and 173 savings accounts, and 1,151 court hearings for Berlusconi and his associates.

⁹² Paolucci, 133.

⁹³ For example, see: “Rutelli fischia la rimonta”, *la Repubblica*, March 1, 2001

(<http://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2001/03/01/rutelli-fischia-la-rimonta.html>);

“Francesco. dieci mesidi corsa per una rimonta impossibile.”, *la Repubblica*, May 14, 2001

(<http://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2001/05/14/francesco-dieci-mesi-di-corsa-per->

designating himself as a type of comeback kid, Rutelli partially mirrored the season's fictive heroes: any type of underdog or "comeback" portrayal resembles the dramatic tension necessary for most good stories (i.e. the uncertainty, even if superficial, of the success of the protagonist). In the programs considered here, protagonists are presented as underdogs in the season's mini-series (*Pio*, *Uno bianca*, *Una storia qualunque*, *Piccolo mondo antico*), while their more "serial" cousins (*Montalbano*, *Rocca*) offer protagonists that, even if faced with great challenges, are never really depicted as potential failures.

This self-portrayal played out against a Berlusconi campaign that, as noted previously, initially sought to frame the election as a foregone conclusion —Berlusconi's victory being obvious and inevitable — but which at times switched into "victim" mode, with Berlusconi variously the victim of a foreign conspiracy (in concert with Italian "communists" and judges), of potential civil rights violations (if the media interests at the heart of his conflicts-of-interest were to be dealt with inappropriately), and even as the victim of death threats.⁹⁴ In *Una storia italiana*, Berlusconi's time out of government between 1994 and the 2001 election is described as "The Crossing of the Desert" (*La traversata nel deserto*), with six pages dedicated to the difficult road he and *Forza Italia* followed on their way to the 2001 election, with the presumed victory of Berlusconi and his party representing the electoral promised land.⁹⁵

This self-representation as martyr figure, sacrificing himself for the greater good of Italy, has been a consistent theme of Berlusconi's political rhetoric since the 1994 Italian elections. While such sacrifice is at the heart of many fictional protagonists' heroic actions, the same publicly-advertised, *conscious* spirit of sacrifice is mostly absent from the heroes of the fictional programs of the 2000-2001 season. *Montalbano*, *Rocca*, *Pio*, Valerio from *Uno Bianca*, and Franco from *Piccolo mondo antico* all risk their own comforts, and occasionally, their own lives, for the greater good, but in all these cases, with the exception of *Pio*, who notes his suffering in praise of God, little to no emphasis is placed on the deliberate, conscious choice of the hero to sacrifice himself for a greater good. In other words, these protagonists do not constantly remind the viewer of the sacrifices they are making. Below I discuss the other principal characteristics of the fictional heroes of my 2000-2001 program set.

Fiction

While they defy a singular definition, the six protagonists of my sample's fictional programs do share two characteristics that offer an indication of what Italians expected from their heroes, or at least what television producers felt Italians expected from their heroes, in 2000-2001: a certain humility and an "*alla mano*," or approachable, persona. *Padre Pio*, a notable, and immensely popular, Italian Franciscan monk of the twentieth century, was notoriously humble and "down-to-earth" in his life, and these character elements are stressed in his biopic. *Il maresciallo Rocca*, the approximate equivalent of a local police chief in the U.S., while stern and father-like at times, is essentially an approachable friend, always ready with a quick joke or witty remark, to both his own family and to his colleagues, including his

[una.html](#)); "Rutelli promette all'Ulivo la grande rimonta", Corriere della Sera, October 22, 2000 (http://archiviostorico.corriere.it/2000/ottobre/22/Rutelli_promette_all_Ulivo_grande_co_0_001022969.shtml); "Rutelli rimonta e spera nel miracolo", Corriere della Sera, May 14, 2001 (http://archiviostorico.corriere.it/2001/maggio/14/Rutelli_rimonta_spera_nel_miracolo_co_0_0105147145.shtml)

⁹⁴ Bellucci and Bull, 2-28.

⁹⁵ *Una storia italiana*, 92-98.

subordinates. Rocca is also quick to assign credit to his colleagues, rather than to himself, a trait he shares with Salvo Montalbano of the eponymous series. *Montalbano*, a talented investigator, puts forward an at times caustic front, behind which he deploys a deep affection for his friends, including subordinates, and respect for even the most inconsequential, or powerful, residents of Vigata, the fictional town where the show is set; his language is often plain and direct. Valerio, a fictional protagonist from the historically-inspired *Uno bianca*, is cast as the simple hero that just wants to have a family; he is drawn into his struggle against a group of corrupt policemen against his will, and is never seen taking credit for his heroic actions. His lifestyle, dress, and language are all modest. Franco from *Piccolo mondo antico* is set in the same mold: a reluctant hero yearning for a simple life with his wife and child, free of the jealous meddlings of his mother; but beyond dealing with these familial troubles, he must sacrifice himself for the cause of Italian independence, ultimately letting go of his noble background (and substantial inheritance). In *Una storia qualunque*, Italian icon Nino Manfredi is cast somewhat against type, as a senior citizen who lacks the sympathetic energy usually associated with the characters played, and public persona assumed by, the actor. Yet Michele, Manfredi's character, is poor, scared, and alone; his simple desire to be reunited with his family and his willingness to give up all other forms of self-interest, in addition to his direct manner and openness to the most diverse array of "others"—transvestites, immigrants, etc.—mark him as a protagonist that is certainly humble, if not "*alla mano*."

Problems

Political campaigns and television programs such as those I analyze identify a series of problems in their respective worlds. Given the larger scope of this project, it was not possible to catalog and describe in detail the numerous problems that are mentioned in the eight narratives I analyze. Instead, I have sought, and found, several problems that cut across the majority of the texts considered here, and privileged these for analysis. In this way, I hope to be able to more competently compare "apples and apples" when discussing the relationship between politics and popular culture, though such an operation will never be perfect.

As mentioned previously, the 2000-2001 election and television seasons overlapped in their engagement with foreigners and large institutions (such as state bureaucracies and the Catholic Church). The former were framed as problematic in political and some fictional discourse, while the latter were the target of extensive critique across both campaign propaganda and fictional programming. In *Padre Pio*, foreigners are not dealt with at length, but the jealousies, doubts, and inequities of the Catholic Church are. Aside from the petty jealousies of fellow monks, Pio's greatest antagonists appear to be the Church's various rules and investigations that limit his ability to preach and to heal. The Italian government in Rome also comes in for its fair share of critique, its only real presence being that of the abstract tax man, the far-away power that wants its share of Pio's charitable donations. *Una storia qualunque* deals extensively with foreigners, complementing its central story, one of family reunion between an Italian father and his children, with numerous characters of foreign descent, whose various nationalities serve no narrative purpose other than to signify that everyone is human, that this story really is universal. The root of the protagonist's problems is the abuse of the law by local potentates — he was wrongly jailed for a crime he did not commit — an indictment of the Italian legal system that is implied or outright stated in the other fictional programs considered here.

Rocca (and also *Montalbano* and Valerio, from *Uno bianca*, as I will discuss shortly) presents a positive representation of one state institution, the *Carabinieri*, or federal police, but at the expense of the state's legal bureaucracy, symbolized by the local district attorney, or *procuratore capo*. *Rocca* thus struggles not only against wrong-doers, but also his own legal superior, a cynical and by-the-book lawyer who is the perfect foil to the humane, and instinctual, *Rocca*. *Rocca* also deals heavily with foreigners in the season's episodes, with Eastern European and Asian nannies, prostitutes, and criminals taking important supporting roles in his investigations into both domestic disputes and international organized crime (in this case, the Apulian-Albanian connections of the *Sacra Corona Unita* organized crime group). *Montalbano* likewise must usually skirt the legal obstacles imposed on him by the law itself and especially by the local district attorney, even when investigating the involvement of a Romanian immigrant in a series of murders. In the season in question, his unorthodox methods include the querying of his sexualized Swedish friend Ingrid about the shaven pubic area of a Romanian woman, who is primarily referenced by this particular aspect of her body.

In *Uno bianca*, Albanians are quickly cast as scapegoats for a series of crimes, while Romani (the ethnic group) are caricatured by the film's antagonists as less than human.⁹⁶ The real struggle in *Uno bianca*, however, is that of the just man against the ills of public institutions, in this case corrupt police and inept legal bureaucracies. *Piccolo mondo antico* draws out a story of family dysfunction and reunion against the backdrop of the Italian Risorgimento, with northern Italian patriots taking aim at the nefarious "other," in this case the Austrians. To underline the adaptive nature of the work, in-line with contemporary Italian preoccupations with foreigners and Italian unification itself, at one point the characters of the mini-series, in a scene absent from the Fogazzaro novel, ask if the hoped-for state should be called "*Padania*," the Northern League's proposed name for its idealized secessionist state. After rejecting "*Padania*" and "*Alta Italia*" ("High", or "Northern Italy"), the characters settle on "*Italia*" ("Italy").⁹⁷

The political items I have chosen for study likewise touch on matters foreign and bureaucratic. Those Berlusconi posters that did not feature a close-up of the candidate publicized studiously, and stereotypically normal, white Italian families.



⁹⁶ In informal, American English the Romani are referred to as "gypsies."

⁹⁷ Fogazzaro's novel was originally published in 1895.

To better appreciate the significance of this whiteness, it is important to consider the larger media context of the poster campaign. Both Marini (cited above) and Simona Cannataro and Marco Mazzoni in the same volume discuss the media's focus on immigration in the fall of 2000. Marini shows that between October 2000 and January 1, 2001, "Immigration and Immigration and Crime" was the second most reported issue in major Italian newspapers (behind "Schools"), while it was the most discussed issue on the major Italian "telegiornali," or nightly news programs.⁹⁸ Cannataro and Mazzoni demonstrate how media coverage of immigration spiked several times in the fall, arriving at nearly 50% of a week's news coverage (newspapers and nightly news programs) several times during the season.⁹⁹ Amidst such fears of, and media attention to, immigrant crime, the Berlusconi "security" poster featuring such an intentionally white family clearly insinuates that Berlusconi would not just keep the family safe, but that he would keep Italy safe from non-whites. The explicit whiteness of the families in other posters, dedicated to taxes, or to a vague better future, also underscore that Berlusconi stands for this white Italy. Moving beyond racial associations, Berlusconi also used the Contract with Italians' "crime" clause to reinforce his image of precision and tradition. The clause promises, in the case of a Berlusconi victory:

Attuazione del "Piano per la difesa dei cittadini e la prevenzione dei crimini" che prevede tra l'altro l'introduzione dell'istituto del "poliziotto o carabiniere o vigile di quartiere" nelle città, con un risultato di una forte riduzione del numero dei reati rispetto agli attuali 3 milioni.¹⁰⁰

The reference to 3 million crimes paints the picture of an Italy under siege, and continues Berlusconi's taste for exact figures, while the phrases "la difesa dei cittadini" and "poliziotto o carabiniere o vigile di quartiere" suggest first that only citizens, here code for white Italians, need protection, and second that there needs to be a nostalgic return to some type of familiar neighborhood, the block or two of yesteryear where everyone allegedly knew each other and crime was not a problem.

Rutelli also played off public fears of immigrant crime to not appear too multicultural. In his "crime" poster, the racketeering of illegal immigrants is highlighted as something to be stopped; no mention is made of domestic organized crime, which was surely more pervasive at the time. Another Rutelli poster took shots at another fundamental Italian institution: his "healthcare" poster calls for less bureaucracy, and more humanity.

⁹⁸ "Immigration and Immigration and Crime" is treated as one issue in Marini's framework.

⁹⁹ Simona Cannataro and Marco Mazzoni. "Sei temi per una campagna elettorale" in Mancini, 50.

¹⁰⁰ The text of the Contract with Italians is still available online at <http://www.tgcom24.mediaset.it/documenti/contratto.pdf>; TGCOM24 is a news outlet of Berlusconi's Mediaset.



A similar jab against state institutions was made when Berlusconi called-in to the program *Raggio Verde*. While nominally an attack on the program's host, Michele Santoro, the wider arc of Berlusconi's message was to underscore the alleged leftist bias of the RAI, the Italian public broadcaster.¹⁰¹ In condemning RAI and its politicized employees, Berlusconi sought to bring attention to what he and his supporters described as the structural biases of the Italian state: politicized media personalities, *fannulloni* (do-nothing) bureaucrats, and leftist (in his words "communist") magistrates. In *Una storia italiana*, the *Cavaliere* reiterated these themes, describing his private television channels as a liberating alternative to the continued political manipulation of the RAI, while his repeated legal problems were seen as a form of "judicial persecution" that had included a 1994 "judicial coup" that had caused his first government to fall.¹⁰² In framing public institutions in such a manner, the leader of *Forza Italia* portrayed the judicial and media biases laid out against him as symbolic failings of a public administration gone wrong.

For Rutelli, the largest problems facing Italy appeared to be inequality and a cumbersome bureaucracy. Thus, his "crime" poster argues that security is a universal right, implying that only elites enjoy security, and that he will provide faster and more equitable verdicts, a critique of Italy's notoriously slow justice system. Similarly, Rutelli's "healthcare" poster claims that quality healthcare belongs to everyone, not just the privileged. These concerns with inequality dovetail well with Rutelli's denunciations of Berlusconi's conflicts-of-interest, a consistent

¹⁰¹ In his attack on Santoro and his program (the latest element of a center-right boycott of most RAI political talk shows), Berlusconi sarcastically offered his congratulations for such "live trials," ("Complimenti per questi processi in diretta") describing Santoro's and similar shows as "trap programs" (trasmissioni trappola). Berlusconi concluded his telephonic intervention with an admonition to Santoro: "You are an employee of the public broadcaster; Contain yourself!"

¹⁰² *Una storia italiana*, 55-59; 83-84; 91-93.

theme of his campaign.¹⁰³ These criticisms cast the media mogul as a symbolic head of the elite that enjoyed safety, good healthcare, and the general run of the country. The picture of an Italy divided along class lines and ruled top-down by the wealthy also found expression in Rutelli's emphasis on wide public involvement in renewing and improving Italy. As mentioned previously, several Rutelli posters included slogans such as "*L'Italia di tanti. Non di pochi. Rinnoviamo l'Italia, insieme*" ("The Italy of many. Not the few. Let's renew Italy, together") and "*Un'Italia migliore, costruiamola insieme.*" ("A better Italy, let's build it together") Rutelli thus saw Italy's ills, which for him also included environmental concerns and immigrant-fueled crime, as well as underemployment, as deriving from callous and out-of-touch elites. The solution to this situation was a capillary reform movement set to his vision (one of his posters even proclaimed that Rutelli "*guarda lontano*" ("sees far").



Politics, Popular Culture, Gramsci: Supermen and Common Sense

Stepping back to consider the fictional and political narratives considered here, we see that while the respective spheres overlap significantly in their engagement with certain phenomena, they diverge substantially in others. Large institutions, particularly the Italian state, were generally shown as flawed entities whose deficiencies stood in the way of the country's, or the relevant protagonist's, success, in both fictional and political spheres. Berlusconi and Rutelli likewise cast implicit blame for Italy's alleged crime problem on immigrants, a connotation that was partially, though not entirely, replicated in several of the season's most important fictional television programs. The respective political campaigns saw numerous other problems with Italy, including high taxes and poor leadership (Berlusconi), and an inequitable society driven by a restricted elite (Rutelli). The relevant fictional programs also engaged with numerous other issues, including personal jealousy, organized crime, and corruption. In the interest of time, I will leave aside a detailed consideration of the vast majority of these problems to focus on the

¹⁰³ Umberto Rosso. "Rutelli: Berlusconi è un estremista adesso ha oltrepassato il segno." *La Repubblica*, May 7, 2001, <http://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2001/05/07/rutelli-berlusconi-un-estremista-adesso-ha-oltrepassato.html>

respective spheres' treatment of foreigners and institutions. I contextualize my considerations of these phenomena with respect to several of Antonio Gramsci's relevant ideas on "Supermen" and common sense, important strands of his thoughts on popular culture and politics.

In the numerous examples discussed earlier, foreigners are repeatedly othered, even when portrayed positively. Consider *Una storia qualunque*, a mini-series devoted, in part, to showing that "others" (immigrants, transvestites, singles, senior citizens, the sexually liberated, etc.) are "normal." But the program tries so hard to underscore this message, inserting deliberately crafted others into every conceivable aspect of the mini-series — a half-Polish Italian lawyer, an Italian language class comprised of every conceivable nationality, a black immigrant Italian teacher, a sympathetic transvestite, black Catholic priests playing basketball in the background of an important scene, an English boyfriend — often for no apparent narrative purpose, other than to highlight diversity, that these faces and names become mere tokens, symbols of the broadcaster's (RAI) good intentions.¹⁰⁴

The foreign othering of *Una storia qualunque* is similar to the superficial characterization of foreigners seen in the other television programs discussed here.¹⁰⁵ This "fictional" othering facilitates the political othering witnessed in Berlusconi's and Rutelli's respective election campaigns. For Rutelli, crime appears to result principally from illegal immigrants, not domestic organized crime. Berlusconi never says it outright, but the aforementioned "whiteness" of his campaign posters, and the rhetoric of his Contract with Italians, certainly indicate immigrants as the primary source of Italy's crime problems. What both culture and politics are doing in these cases is creating a comfort zone for the viewer and voter, something that allows them to push responsibility for a given phenomenon away from themselves and onto an other.

This idea aligns well with the 2000-2001 programs' and campaigns' treatment of bureaucratic institutions, which are cast as generic and abstract symbols of social ills, resulting in the mystification of these institutions' underlying problems (corruption, lack of civil spirit, inadequate funding, poor organization). The public's own potential implication in the perceived decrepit state of Italian institutions — tax evasion, nepotism, disregard for the spirit of laws and regulations, if not the letter — is ignored. At the same time, the proposed solutions to these generic and abstract problems are not a critical change of public behavior or elite renewal, but, in the case of most of the fictional programs considered here, and in Berlusconi's campaign especially, the heroic actions of a single individual. Thus, while formal election rules did not call for any type of direct election of a prime minister, and favored the formation of broad coalitions, the center-right's campaign largely focused on Berlusconi, eclipsing the efforts of his electoral partners and even making *Forza Italia* a mere appendage to his dynamic leadership. Even those

¹⁰⁴ It should also be noted that the wide swath of nationalities portrayed in the program was likely partially caused by international co-producers' need to literally "characterize" their financial contribution, a commodification of race and/or national identity. This financial-"character" commodification seems to be an increasingly prominent aspect of at least Italian cinema and television productions, due to the difficulty (financial and/or bureaucratic) of obtaining adequate domestic funding. A similar scenario might also be taking place in regard to the locations featured in cinematic and televisual texts; Italian regions, at least, seem to be increasingly interested in promoting themselves through films and television programs, and hence contributing to the financing of texts that feature these locations.

¹⁰⁵ In *Rocca*, foreigners are either prostitutes, domestic servants, or organized crime members; in *Montalbano* foreign women are known either for a shaved body part or their relaxed sexual mores; in *Uno Bianca* Romani are stereotyped as criminal nomads; in *Piccolo mondo antico* Austrians are more or less portrayed as a single, generic, cold, enemy.

fictional programs that nominally used teams, such as Montalbano's investigative unit, or Rocca's *carabinieri*, nonetheless revolve around *the* hero, who may be humble and approachable, but is nevertheless the exceptional figure whose special talents almost singularly resolve the various problems addressed in these programs.

Gramsci devotes several passages of the Prison Notebooks to such "Supermen." In line with his wider concern of the relationship between high and low culture, he asks what, if any, impact such supermen's mannered heroics have on high culture and popular productions. In regard to the former, Gramsci saw the heroes of Dumas as the ultimate forebears of the Nietzschean Superman, while in "low" culture such heroes become "real," figuratively taking on a life among readers whose interest in such heroes drives the numerous resurrections, continuations, and backstories that proliferate around the successful heroes of serial popular culture.¹⁰⁶ Today this interest in the lives of the protagonists of popular culture is still alive, extra-diegetically in the form of various star-studded advertisements and gossip publications, diegetically through the various sequels and prequels that surround the heroes of the most popular programs. Gigi Proietti, the actor behind *Rocca*, has come to be identified, on and off screen, by a persona that appears to characterize Rocca, but also the real Gigi Proietti (one small example being the character/actor's dependence on, and comments about, coffee in the storylines of *Il maresciallo Rocca* and the advertisements for an Italian coffee brand that Proietti has promoted). The last installment of the Rocca franchise is built around flashbacks meant to flesh out the youth of this successful character; similarly, a series dedicated to the youth of Montalbano is currently in production.

Given this affection for these fictional protagonists, it is clear that these "Supermen" can be seen as representative of personal characteristics that many Italian consumers find desirable. In 2000-2001, it is apparent that many Italians were attracted to humble leaders that were both heroic and modest, despite their various talents. Interestingly, this idea was only partially transferred to the political sphere. Berlusconi distanced himself from the general public by emphasizing his exceptionalism; Rutelli, on the other hand, attempted to cast himself as an approachable man of the people, out to protect Italians from not only immigrant crime and heavy bureaucracy, but also powerful elites like Berlusconi. Rutelli distanced himself, at least partially, from this "Superman" model in the rhetorical lip service he paid to choral protagonism.

It is far simpler to tell the story of a single protagonist against a generic enemy than to explicate the potential for collaborative, or "choral," protagonism against complex and interrelated problems. Milly Buonanno has described choral protagonism as a form of collective effort among a small community; rather than featuring the heroic exploits of the single hero, choral narratives stress the potential for group resolution of problems. While not entirely new in the Italian television tradition, Buonanno notes that choral protagonism has certainly become more prevalent in Italian television programs in the last twenty years.¹⁰⁷ I see this choral protagonism replicated, at least rhetorically, in the "we" of many political movements; it is not the single politician who will lead his followers to the promised land, but they together, in collaboration, that will achieve their political goals.

¹⁰⁶ Antonio Gramsci, "Origine popolare del "superuomo" and "[Gli 'eroi' della letteratura popolare]" in *Letteratura e vita nazionale* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1987), 81-83; 85. The original locations of these passages in the 1975 Gerratana edition of the *Prison Notebooks* are, respectively, Notebook 16, Paragraph 13 and Notebook 8, Paragraph 122.

¹⁰⁷ Milly Buonanno, "Per voce sola, e coro: L'Italia nella fiction" in Buonanno, 101-119.

While this politics of the “we” appears to be quite common in modern political movements, in contemporary storytelling, a large cast of characters is usually, though not exclusively, reserved for serial stories that must regularly produce an overwhelming amount of narrative data, and hence need a steady supply of new characters and fairly facile problems to burn through (soaps), or for non-serial productions that attempt to portray different parts of a given “world” by underscoring the chance connections that drive history (*Crash* is an American example of such a film, while *La meglio gioventù*, though to a lesser degree, is an Italian illustration of this concept). In either case, it seems it is difficult to tell a story of large-scale social collaboration or even extensive group work in the resolution of complex problems.¹⁰⁸ In most cases, a large cast of characters either operates in a superficial world (soaps), or faces the true complexity of society with no “macro-agency,” i.e. the ability to produce coordinated social change on a large scale.

It is tempting to attribute the facile stereotyping, “othering,” and “isolating” of the hero discussed above to the structural time and content limits of popular television programs and general election campaigns: average viewers have little time and/or attention; correspondingly, fictional television programs and campaign propaganda must be superficial and generic when they describe their protagonist and their problems. It is also tempting to attribute the tendency to feature single protagonists and limited problems of popular fictional and political discourse to the generalist nature of their audiences: to reach a vast, heterogeneous public, it is best to shoot for the middle by offering something that is easily comprehensible to the average viewer. But past and present exceptions to this assumption show that this need not be true.

Gramsci underlines the popular potential of “high” culture authors like Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, while more recently, and more in line with the present discussion, *La piovra*, the foundation stone of contemporary Italian televised fiction, offers popular entertainment with a political purpose that does not lazily pander to its audience’s average cultural level.¹⁰⁹ Even among the shows of my sample, *Il commissario Montalbano*, while offering facile representations of foreigners and institutions, manages to offer character portraits and snapshots of contemporary Italian life that while enjoyable, are also somewhat realistic, in that they are not stale fulfillments of what the conditioned viewer expects from generalist television, but fairly realistic portraits of human sentiment. These examples show that while perhaps more difficult to execute, critical discourse in generalist televised fiction is possible, though the representation of choral creation of social change, as discussed above, remains for the most part elusive, at least in the Italian tradition.

On the political front, some of the 1996 and 2006 campaign speeches of Romano Prodi show that intelligent and popular political narratives are not mutually exclusive in contemporary Italy. These counter-examples are significant because my 2000-2001 sample materials’ emphasis on superficial solutions cuts both ways: in Italy, the left, as well as Berlusconi, as seen in the examples cited above, resorted to facile messaging. Busy individuals, seeking shortcuts in order to process the most data with minimal exertion, efficiently process the central tropes of superficial fictional programming and election rhetoric through cognitive frames built from personal experience and mediated knowledge. Since many viewers do not critically reflect on their own frames, concentrating instead on the proposals of given fictional and political texts, information presented by fictional and political programs is assessed through a rationale that comes to be seen as a type of universal common sense. The consistently superficial solutions

¹⁰⁸ The American television program *The Wire* seems to be a prominent, and rare, counter-example to this idea.

¹⁰⁹ “Gli ‘umili’” and “Popolarità del Tolstoj e del Manzoni,” *Letteratura e vita nazionale*, 52; 54-56.

frequently proposed by popular culture and politics help to solidify and ossify these frames of reference, adding cultural and political legitimacy to an individual's existing "common sense," especially since the two spheres often mutually reinforce each other.

While a discussion of Gramsci's detailed consideration of common sense is in order here, and is offered below, the aforementioned description of fictional and political programs' mutual ideological reinforcement is clearly reminiscent of Althusser's theory of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs). Althusser notes that while superficially discrete, these apparatuses essentially communicate the same, underlying core messages, or ideas that facilitate the reproduction of the existing means of production. Even without diving into an Althusserian analysis of such means in contemporary Italy, it is apparent that in 2000-2001 both the political and cultural apparatuses, at least as seen in my examples, interpellated individuals as such, offering them mirror images of their own subjectivity in their emphasis on distinct, individual heroes, with responsibility for problems being projected onto others. Here is not the place for a detailed investigation of contemporary Italian capitalism, but it would appear, and these are admittedly crude words, that the "inspirational image"-based form of politics and pop culture, at least in my sample, is in-sync with the often individual, consumerist, fantasies of contemporary Italian consumer culture.¹¹⁰

In the *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci describes common sense as an uncodified and generic form of thought that makes given political and social institutions and conditions seem natural and eternal.¹¹¹ In 2000-2001, this idea is seen in the popular tropes of immigrant crime and bureaucratic incompetence as external "facts," i.e. mostly immutable conditions the responsibility for which is easily unloaded onto others, found ready confirmation in the fictional and political rhetoric of the texts examined here. Politically, this favors "conservative" parties, here meant not as support for rightist ideologies, but adherence to popular expectations. In the Italian context, this "conservative prejudice" tends to place leftist parties at a disadvantage, since progressive programs generally, though not universally, call for change to the status quo *and* the involvement of large state bureaucracies to enact that change. Given the relatively poor performance, real or perceived, of Italian institutions over time, parties that call for a smaller state, traditionally in-line with European liberal ideology, such as that promoted (at least superficially) by Berlusconi have a rhetorical advantage in appealing to voters. In the case of single protagonists and the fictional programs of 2000-2001, there appears to be some correspondence — though not necessarily causal — between an emphasis on heroic, single protagonists and a liberal emphasis on the individual. Conversely, the heroes of 2000-2001 are not motivated by private ambitions (the impetus behind Adam Smith's "invisible hand"), but by feelings of duty for the common good.

¹¹⁰ Louis Althusser. "Ideology and ideological state apparatuses (notes towards an investigation)." *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (1971): 1971-127; contemporary consumerist fantasies are reminiscent of Colin Campbell's "autonomous imaginative hedonism." *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (New York: Blackwell, 1987). Ginsborg has associated such "hedonism" with the increasingly intense consumer culture of Italy that arose in the 1980s. Paul Ginsborg. *Italy and its Discontents 1980–2001: Family, Civil Society, State* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 84.

¹¹¹ Antonio Gramsci, *The Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings, 1916-1935*. Ed. David Forgacs (New York: NYU Press, 2000), 343-346; Kate Crehan, "Gramsci's concept of common sense: a useful concept for anthropologists?." *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 16.2 (2011): 273-287.

Italian Politics and Popular Culture in the Past: Protagonists and Problems

To more fully understand the relationship between politics and popular culture in contemporary Italy, at least as seen through the two proxies discussed here, campaign rhetoric and televised fiction, it is helpful to explore past iterations of this relationship. Utilizing Gramsci's thoughts on the 19th and early 20th century serial novel, the theatre, and the early cinema, in addition to his analyses of the political communication of the Liberal and Fascist periods, we can sketch a comparative picture of the links between politics and popular culture in pre-WWII Italy. Briefly exploring the same links between popular cinema, early Italian television, and peninsular politics in the late 1940s and early 1950s can extend this consideration into the postwar era, and allow us to better understand the tighter links between politics and popular culture in Italy that became more noticeable in the 1980s. Below I provide such an overview of these issues and periods, again focusing my attention on the protagonists and problems of Italian politics and popular culture.

While Gramsci's treatment of the culture of his time includes a noted linguistic and folkloristic angle, of more immediate relevance for the present consideration are Gramsci's thoughts on the organized, industrial forms of popular culture. Gramsci saw great potential in such culture, but viewed its actual content, in most cases, as a fairly sterile commodity. To both popular and bourgeois audiences, it failed to provide convincing portrayals of interior conflict.¹¹² The Chiarella brothers, Turin theatre entrepreneurs, as well as serial authors such as Carolina Invernizio, are repeatedly castigated in Gramsci's cultural writings for the superficial and mechanical nature of their work. But in criticizing these figures, he also draws out the positive potential of popular theatre and literature. In contrast to the hollow pantomime of the Chiarella-sponsored stages, he lauds the humanity and universal truths of Goldoni, Beaumarchais, and performers such as Emma Gramatica; against his stark criticism of Invernizio and similar writers, he points to the popular success of authors such as Dostoevsky, who deal with popular themes without commercially pandering to the audience, as well as the popular potential of past works such as Raffaello Giovagnoli's *Spartaco*, which Gramsci sees, with some revision, as a possible vehicle for a national-popular literature. For Gramsci, such works potentially serve as both entertainment and progressive ethical and political guideposts.¹¹³ This type of educative function

¹¹² Antonio Gramsci. "Theatre and Cinema." *Avanti!* Piedmont edition, August 26, 1916, as well as "Interest," Notebook 5 Paragraph 54 of Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere: edizione critica dell'Istituto Gramsci*. Ed. Valentino Gerratana (Turin: Einaudi, 1977), among others. For example, in "Theatre and Cinema" Gramsci compares the the popular theatre to the cinema in these terms: "The cinema offers exactly the same sensations as the popular theatre, but under better conditions, without the choreographic contrivances of a false intellectualism, without promising too much while delivering little. The usual state presentations are nothing but cinema. The most commonly staged productions are nothing but fabrics of external facts, lacking any human content, in which talking puppets move about variously, without every drawing out a psychological truth, without every managing to impose on the listener's creative imagination a character or passions that are truly felt and adequately expressed. Both excerpts read in *Antonio Gramsci: Selections from Cultural Writings*. Eds. David Forgacs and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 54-56.

¹¹³ In describing commercial literature as a section of national-popular literature, Gramsci notes that "this literature is a popular 'narcotic', an 'opium'...*The Count of Monte-Cristo*...could be analyzed in this light. What man of the people does not believe he has been treated unjustly by the powerful and does not dream about the 'punishment; to inflict upon them?" (*Selections from Cultural Writings*, 348). Gramsci does not endorse such literature, but the link he posits between literary content, cultural identification, and success (wide popularity) is clear. This is also evident when Gramsci discusses the popularity of 19th century French popular literature in 20th century Italy; Gramsci persuasively argues that Italian readers undergo the "moral and intellectual hegemony" of

is absent in the Italian tradition, a case Gramsci makes most explicitly in his critique of Manzoni's *The Betrothed*, whose treatment of popular figures and themes is indicative, for Gramsci, of why the Italian public turned to problematic and often foreign forms of culture for entertainment and, even if unconsciously, moral guidance. *The Betrothed* is paternalistic, and derides, even as it claims to support, the popular classes. This distance between external literary appearances and specific content reflects, in Gramsci's analysis, the space between cosmopolitan Italian intellectuals and the wider public. Gramsci contrasts this style with that of Tolstoy, where common wisdom is positioned to "enlighten and put" educated men "in crisis."¹¹⁴

In his considerations of Italian popular culture, Gramsci notes several trends of interest for our present consideration. Beyond the aforementioned analysis of "Supermen," he also discusses the immense popularity of detective novels in late 19th and early 20th century Italy. Gramsci frames these works as an appeal to the common man's desire for revenge and punishment; more importantly, however, in these stories the official organs of justice, or parts of the State, are repeatedly in discredit. As a result, the heroic provider of justice takes the form of a private or amateur detective, not an official state representative.¹¹⁵ This trend continues today in a modified form. Detective series continue to be among the most highly-consumed programs in Italian television, and the State continues to be seen negatively, though only in its "juridical" form. Italian law enforcement agents are almost always portrayed in a positive light in contemporary Italian television, while their lawyer counterparts and surrounding bureaucracies are repeatedly portrayed as problematic. The figure of the man of order is therefore dynamic in the Italian tradition. Before WWII the problematic nature of the legal apparatus in Italian popular culture is seemingly in-line with the anti-State hostility of non-Establishment figures and opposition groups during the Liberal period, when the inefficiency, incompetence, and inequity of the State were a common theme; it is also in-line with the rhetorically anti-bureaucratic, or anti-deliberative, aspects of Fascist discourse. A cultural anti-State mentality thus seems to have been a long-term component of Italian society, though it appears that with time this hostility has shifted from a generic distaste for State authority to a more particular disdain for the legalistic and/or bureaucratic aspects of the State. It is possible that the lessened hostility towards law enforcement figures, but continued disdain for legal practitioners and national bureaucracies, may have partially resulted from the Fascist rhetorical aggrandizement of action and force and the more general massification of the State apparatus in Italy from the Fascist period forward

French authors because the Italian press is unable to produce relatable stories to the Italian public, due in large part to the distance of Italian intellectuals from the masses and the predominantly fragmentary nature of Italian popular culture. In other words, Gramsci sees no national-popular culture in Italy (*The Gramsci Reader*, 364-367). He does see the popular press as a means to stimulate such a culture (obviously with the aid of increased literacy), and feels that such a culture could in fact be progressive, as discussed above and below in relation to the "popularity" (in terms of reception and cultural availability) of Russian authors such as Tolstoy. See also Gramsci's various "Theatre Industry" and "Chiarella Brothers" entries for *Avanti!* Between 1916 and 1917 wherein he criticizes the artistic and moral shallowness of commercial theatre (in "Theatre Criticism" in *Selections from Cultural Writings*,) as well as his *Prison Notebooks* commentary on "Father Bresciani's Progeny" and "Popular Literature," as organized by Forgacs and Smith in *Selections*; in the former he criticizes 19th and 20th century Italian attempts at Catholic popular literature as being reactionary and overly stylized; in the latter he analyzes the social role and cultural functioning of popular literature in national contexts, as very briefly discussed here.

¹¹⁴ Gramsci, "The 'Popularity of Tolstoy and Manzoni'" (Notebook 23, paragraph 51) and "Attitude to the People in 'The Betrothed'" (Notebook 7 Paragraph 50). Read in *Selections*.

¹¹⁵ Most notably, though not exclusively, "The Detective Novel (i)" (Notebook 21, Paragraph 10) and "The Detective Novel (ii)" (Notebook 21, Paragraph 13). In *Selections from Cultural Writings*, 369-374.

(where State bureaucracies have become increasingly important in numerous sectors of Italian public life).

Of course, numerous other problems were present in the cultural and political discourses of Liberal and Fascist Italy. Since my discussion of the 2000-2001 television and political seasons included a consideration of the roles of foreigners in such contexts, I will briefly touch on the same topic here. The vision of foreigners in politics and popular culture in the Liberal and Fascist periods echoes to some degree that of the 2000-2001 political and television seasons; in other words, in these periods, as in the 2000-2001 materials I have examined, foreigners were “othered,” cast as the inverse of the positive qualities Italian leaders sought to associate with Italy. The most clear examples of this situation come from Italian colonialism of both the Liberal and Fascist periods, wherein Africans were seen as the “backward” complement to the alleged superiority—cultural and militaristic—of Italy.¹¹⁶

Establishment figures in Liberal Italy were also skeptical of foreign intentions with Italy, with Crispi’s fear of foreign plans for, and conspiracies based in, the peninsula being perhaps the most notable example.¹¹⁷ These general discourses become much more nuanced when we consider the stance of socialist and other anti-Establishment groups in Liberal and Fascist Italy, but it is clear that the most powerful political forces in the peninsula saw foreigners as outsiders to be defeated or from whom Italy must be defended. This same idea holds true for important cultural products of the Liberal and Fascist periods. From Carolina Invernizio’s characters to early silent films and beyond, non-Western European foreigners are often cast as malevolent and/or exotic others, lacking the desirable qualities of not only Italian or European heroes, but also “everyday” characters. Two notable examples include *Il bacio di una morta* (1886), a popular novel wherein Invernizio uses Nara, the exotic and dark-skinned seductress, as the foil to noble Italian wife Clara’s virtues of chastity and resilience, and; Giovanni Pastrone’s epic film *Cabiria* (1914), wherein North Africans provide the malicious intent and archaic values to contrast with the innocense, self-sacrifice, and lofty ideals of Cabiria, a young girl, and her Roman rescuer, Fulvius Auxillus, as well as his superstrong slave, Maciste.¹¹⁸

Here too, a much more nuanced picture emerges when we consider the substantial consumption of foreign material, in particular serial literature, by the Italian middle and popular classes. This consumption, discussed at length by Gramsci in the *Prison Notebooks*, problematizes the idea of a monolithic anti-foreigner block, and underlines the divide between domestic and foreign cultural production.¹¹⁹ This foreign vs. domestic paradigm is most apparent during the Fascist period. While over time Fascist authorities became increasingly interested in promoting a positive image of Italy in the country’s popular culture, taking specific actions,

¹¹⁶ This very broad topic has been discussed by multiple scholars in various disciplines. Here I am drawing from the following texts, admittedly in a limited way: Mia Fuller, “Wherever You Go, There You Are: Fascist Plans for the Colonial City of Addis Ababa and the Colonizing Suburb of EUR’42.” *Journal of Contemporary History* 31.2 (1996): 397-418; Karen Pinkus, *Bodily Regimes: Italian Advertising under Fascism*. U of Minnesota Press, 1995; Christopher Duggan, “Francesco Crispi, ‘political education’ and the problem of Italian national consciousness, 1860–1896.” *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 2.2 (1997): 141-166.

¹¹⁷ Duggan has noted that Crispi claimed that the French were set to attack Italy in the 1880s and that the Sicilian Fasci were part of a conspiracy involving France, the Vatican, and Russia, Duggan, 143.

¹¹⁸ Invernizio, Carolina. *Il bacio d'una morta* (Turin: Einaudi, 2008 (1886)); Pastrone, Giovanni. *Cabiria*, 1914.

¹¹⁹ Gramsci discusses this phenomenon while exploring the absence or otherwise problematic nature national-popular culture in Italy, specifically the lack of a type of national-popular literature akin to what he sees as the national and popular literature of France, at least its more successful serial novels (Q21§5). Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere: edizione critica dell'Istituto Gramsci*. Ed. Valentino Gerratana (Turin: Einaudi, 1977).

including censorship, to do so, foreign films and comics, among other items, were heavily consumed by the Italian public.¹²⁰

Beyond the aforementioned detectives, the heroes of popular culture, considered generally, seem to have first differed from, and then coincided with, the political protagonists of the Liberal and Fascist periods. Garibaldi became a popular hero in-line with the swashbuckling adventure press of the 19th century, his military campaigns celebrated in biographies, portraits, songs, and even fictional plays and novels.¹²¹ Such a romantic presentation was not associated with Liberal leaders such as Francesco Crispi or Giovanni Giolitti, whose politicking prevented a similar “heroic” presence in the popular media.¹²² After the Great War, however, Mussolini’s performative rhetoric certainly echoed that of the supermen of popular cinema, in particular *Maciste*.¹²³ Such an “alignment” of political and pop cultural heroism follows on Garibaldi’s blending of history and fantasy, and anticipates the mediatic “superman-ism” of Berlusconi, where the distinction between politics and entertainment is severely weakened. Even where formal distinctions between the two spheres are or were maintained, they are or were united “technically,” that is in terms of method and medium(s) of their delivery. Thus television and the techniques of advertising are the cause of the elision of politics and popular culture in Berlusconi’s experience, while newsreels, radio broadcasts, and cinema determine the delivery of Mussolini’s political-pop cultural rhetoric.

After the *ventennio*, politics and popular culture seem to again go their separate ways until the 1980s. It is difficult to see De Gasperi, Andreotti, Fanfani, Moro or other *Democrazia cristiana* (DC. Christian Democracy, the principal political party of the period) figures as being in any way similar to the heroes of Italian television, in its high or low vestiges — either the *sceneggiato* or the quiz show, or to the stars of the various *commedie all’italiana* — pink, political, or otherwise. While it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to fully consider this political-cultural dissonance, at least in terms of the respective spheres’ protagonists and problems, a brief consideration of what came before Berlusconi can help to illustrate his synthesis of politics and culture. Such a consideration needs to take into account three factors, at least:

¹²⁰ Ruth Ben Ghiat has noted the particular attention paid to foreign high culture by Fascist political and cultural officials, who sought to understand and consequently surpass such culture in fields ranging from architecture to literature. To this end, the regime supported translations of foreign literature and actively invited foreign intellectuals to Italy for conferences or other “passive” propaganda activities. Ben Ghiat also notes the popularity of foreign literature among Italian intellectuals of the period, including works by authors such as Dos Passos and Sinclair Lewis. *Fascist Modernities: Italy, 1922-1945*. Univ of California Press, 2004, 33-37; 46-55. David Forgacs has documented the popularity of foreign popular culture in Italy during the Fascist regime, in particular foreign films. In 1936, foreign films, predominantly American, made up 84% of the Italian film market. Forgacs further notes that by 1938 the popularity of foreign comics was such that, in conjunction with an increasingly hostile anti-foreign posturing by the regime, Mussolini and his allies prohibited the distribution of foreign comics, with the notable exception of Disney products (only to be suppressed in 1941). Forgacs, David. *L’industrializzazione della cultura italiana (1880-2000)*, Il Mulino, 2000, 81-108.

¹²¹ Riall, Lucy. *Garibaldi: Invention of a Hero* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 227-271.

¹²² Perceptions of Crispi are described in Duggan’s “Francesco Crispi, ‘political education’ and the problem of Italian national consciousness, 1860–1896.” *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 2.2 (1997): 141-166; a survey of Giolitti’s career is found in Alexander, J. *The Hunchback’s Tailor: Giovanni Giolitti and Liberal Italy from the Challenge of Mass Politics to the Rise of Fascism, 1882-1922* (Portsmouth: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2001), 1-8.

¹²³ Luca Cottini has noted the similarities between Mussolini’s bodily posturing and “strongman” image and that of the fictional hero: “La novità di Maciste alpino.” *Italian Culture* 27.1 (2009): 43-59. In a less popular vein, Mussolini also appears to have been influenced by the political-cultural “performances” of D’Annunzio and Futurist leader Filippo Tommaso Marinetti.

international politics; the increasing commercialization of Italian culture; the technological aspects of the most important media of the period.¹²⁴

International politics are the most important aspect to consider when exploring the politics-popular culture link in the pre-Berlusconi postwar period. The effective veto on the PCI (*Partito comunista italiano*, “Italian Communist Party”) presence in national government, imposed by the U.S. during the Cold War, undermined DC motivation, and capacity, to fully fuse culture and politics through charismatic leaders. This is not to say that the DC did not heavily influence cultural output and consumption in Italy before the 1980s, it clearly did; but a drastic collusion of cultural and political forms such as that eventually attempted under Fascism, or later practiced by Berlusconi, due in large part to his control of vast swaths of the Italian culture industries, was not necessary in Cold War Italy, given the DC’s almost guaranteed positioning at the center of Italian politics, as well as likely American resistance to any overly heavy-handed attempts to meld the State with the cultural industries in the production of explicit or implicit propaganda.

Such syncing between politics and culture would also have been more difficult given the increasing commercialization of Italian culture. While state activity in the cultural industries has been a consistent aspect of Italian political intervention since the formation of the Italian state, following the Second World War and continuing through Berlusconi’s cultural “reign” from the 1980s to the 2000s, private enterprise played an increasingly important role in the production of such culture. Driven by profit, rather than electoral success under the aegis of, speaking broadly, Catholic or Communist ideology, such firms drove the production of cultural items often at-odds with the prevailing political ideologies. As noted above, these firms clearly had to operate under the regulation and implicit pressure of the important political forces in Italy, most notably the DC, but also, especially among certain publics, the PCI; still, the market gave them other creative impetuses that often differed from, or at least put pressure on, political ideals. Pasolini has most famously noted this situation:

È vero che in tutti questi anni la censura televisiva è stata una censura vaticana. Solo però che il Vaticano non ha capito che cosa doveva e cosa non doveva censurare. Doveva censurare per esempio «Carosello», perché è in «Carosello», onnipotente, che esplode in tutto il suo nitore, la sua assolutezza, la sua perentorietà, il nuovo tipo di vita che gli italiani «devono» vivere... D'altra parte le trasmissioni di carattere specificamente religioso della Televisione sono di un tale tedio, di un tale spirito di repressività, che il Vaticano avrebbe fatto bene a censurarle tutte... Gli eroi della propaganda televisiva - giovani su motociclette, ragazze accanto a dentifrici- proliferano in milioni di eroi analoghi nella realtà...

Appunto perché perfettamente pragmatica, la propaganda televisiva rappresenta il momento qualunquistico della nuova ideologia edonistica del consumo: e quindi è enormemente efficace... Se al livello della volontà e della consapevolezza la televisione in tutti questi anni è stata al servizio della Democrazia cristiana e del Vaticano, al livello involontario e inconsapevole essa è stata invece al servizio di un nuovo potere, che non

¹²⁴ The ideas that follow are my own, but much of the background materials is taken from David Forgacs and Stephen Gundle. *Mass Culture and Italian Society from Fascism to the Cold War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), and Forgacs, *L'industrializzazione della cultura italiana (1880-2000)* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2000).

coincide più ideologicamente con la Democrazia cristiana e non sa più che farsene del Vaticano.¹²⁵

The period in question saw the birth of numerous radical political and cultural groups that, while shaping the increasingly consumerist popular culture being produced by rapidly consolidating culture industries, could not significantly align their own message with the mainstream cultural output of the time because of differing ideologies, and the limitations of existing technology. This was a period of “restricted” mass media, with effective control of cultural production limited to a small elite of intellectuals, capitalists, and state representatives. Such radical or alternative groups could have effected more critical purchase in the age of the Internet, where media concentration is still a characteristic of most cultural environments, but the Internet itself permits much greater culturally creative possibilities at greatly reduced costs. The era of mass print and broadcast television did not afford such opportunities to alternative groups.

Of course this is not to say that the problems faced in many of these texts, such as family issues, poverty, and moral dilemmas, were not also confronted in the political sphere as well. This side of the political-popular culture equation may have been especially true of the PCI’s attempts to influence the masses in the postwar period, as Stephen Gundle has noted.¹²⁶ Still, it appears that, with respect to the Fascist attempt to sync politics and popular culture, as well as Berlusconi’s synthesis of the same spheres, the Italian postwar period, at least from the end of WWII to the late 1980s, experienced a politics and a popular culture that moved at differing speeds and at times in different directions. An anecdotal, but still noteworthy indicator of this shift can be found in the Maciste films of the 1950s and 1960s: while this Hercules-esque figure continued to be a hit with the Italian public, such charismatic, heroic posturing was absent from the political leadership of both the DC and the PCI.¹²⁷

Given this surface chronology of the relationship between politics and popular culture in Italy, it is tempting to simply equate charismatic political appeal with a blending of politics and popular culture (Mussolini with the supermen of popular literature and cinema, Berlusconi with the colors, commercialism, and vulgarity of neotelevision), but to be considered partially complete, this association must also include a consideration of media. Mussolini’s rise to, and subsequent consolidation of, power, was partially abetted by the expansion and increasing sophistication of the press and then cinema and radio; Berlusconi’s political and commercial prominence is unthinkable without the simultaneous emergence of private television; Beppe Grillo’s recent importance is due in part to his anti-political “charm,” but more so to his deft use of the Internet. This last instance underlines the contingent, and tenuous relationship between politics, popular culture, and media. While Grillo may find himself increasingly in line with an anthropological popular culture, that is a relatively new quotidian life built around, in part, Internet communications, his caustic, explicit, and non-dialogic approach diverge from the “*buonismo*” and sterilely progressive tone of the contemporary heroes of more traditional

¹²⁵ Pasolini, Pier Paolo, and Alfonso Berardinelli. “Ampliamento del ‘bozzetto’ sulla rivoluzione in Italia.” *Scritti corsari*. (Milan: Garzanti, 1975), 58-59.

¹²⁶ Gundle, Stephen. *I comunisti italiani tra Hollywood e Mosca: la sfida della cultura di massa: 1943-1991* (Florence: Giunti Editore, 1995).

¹²⁷ Rota, Veronica. “Lo Specchio della vita: Cinema e pubblico nell’Italia del boom.” <http://digilander.libero.it/vera77/tesine/storia/boom.pdf>. Accessed March 12, 2014.

narrative forms of Italian popular culture, at least as seen in the televised series explored here.¹²⁸ It might be this deeper assimilation of, or identification with, politics and popular culture and dominant technology that most sets Berlusconi apart in historical terms. He is not the first charismatic populist in Italy, and he certainly will not be the last. But he might represent the most comprehensive and complimentary blending of politics and popular culture, rendered through a dominant medium, that Italy has seen or will see for a long time to come, even if this syncing is not perfect, as discussed here and in later chapters.

¹²⁸ I note “traditional narrative” forms of popular culture here because, as I discuss in my next chapter, popular forms like television programs, *cinapanettone* films, and popular literature offer somewhat different protagonists and problems than sources such as gossip magazines and soccer publications. I recognize that “traditional narrative” forms is an imperfect term, but have struggled to find an alternative terminology to differentiate between television series, films, novels, etc. and gossip magazines and soccer literature.

Chapter 3

Introduction

In this chapter I analyze important texts from the 2005-2006 political and television seasons. I begin with a general overview of my findings and their theoretical implications, before moving to a detailed consideration of the seasons' protagonists and problems. I conclude with a historical and theoretical contextualization of my findings, again privileging Gramsci's thoughts on politics and popular culture. I argue that the principal characteristics of the protagonists and problems of 2005-2006 were more scattered and less coherent than those of the 2000-2001 season, though the strongest concentrations of characteristics did mimic those of my earlier sample. These common denominators were a continued tendency of protagonists to be portrayed as approachable, humble, and outside the established circuits of power, and to portray problems of economic elitism and political and social unity, the former condensed into the figure of the wealthy tycoon.

I contextualize these findings with respect to two other important facets of contemporary Italian popular culture, the tabloid and the sporting press. I find that humility, a primary characteristic of the television programs I analyze, plays an ambiguous role in these other facets of contemporary Italian popular culture, while a fairly explicit sexuality is quite prevalent in them, in opposition to a rather surprising demure, or muted sexuality that predominates in my television program set. Building from these observations, I use Gramsci's analyses of sexuality and its relation to economic production to briefly explore Berlusconi's position in contemporary Italian political, economic, and sexual culture. I find that, politically, Berlusconi likely erred in his later sexual decadence (or at least in his inability to hide or properly frame such decadence) since successful Italian political rhetoric continues to be resistant to "contamination" by the brazen sexuality that has marked many instances of Italian popular culture since the 1980s. The understated, or absent sexuality of the televised fiction industry in Italy suggests that it might owe part of its success from the early 1990s forward (as discussed in Chapter 1) to its status as a "safe harbor" from the rather frank sexual nature of much generalist television, the tabloid press, popular cinema, and other areas of Italian popular culture in the last thirty years. Therefore, while the relatively crude sexuality prevalent in much Berlusconi-driven Italian popular culture may have been a key factor in such content's success, its importation into the political realm appears to have been problematic for Berlusconi. Like their televised fiction, Italians appear to prefer their politics to be sexually conservative.

Texts

In both political and fictional spheres, the 2005-2006 seasons represented watershed moments. The fall 2005 primary election to determine the prime ministerial candidate of the *Unione*, the center-left coalition created for the spring 2006 election, was the first national primary of a major political group in Italian history. The 2005-2006 televised fiction season witnessed a record in domestic production, with its 726 hours representing a 458% increase over the same production a decade earlier.¹²⁹ Both spheres also saw the return of familiar faces. The political campaign boiled down to a duel between Romano Prodi, former Italian prime minister

¹²⁹ Milly Buonanno, "La bella stagione." in *La Bella Stagione: La fiction italiana, l'Italia nella fiction. Anno diciottesimo*. Ed. Milly Buonanno (Rome: RAI-ERI, 2007), 7.

and winner of the 1996 election against Berlusconi, and *Il Cavaliere*, this time in the uncomfortable position of the incumbent. The TV season similarly saw the return of noted protagonists, including Montalbano and Rocca, but also a series of other heroes from earlier years that returned for new seasons. At least one expert saw such familiarity as a sign of a maturing, if not already matured, Italian televised fiction industry.¹³⁰

Clear-cut trends in the 2005-2006 fictional and political seasons are hard to discern. Some themes seem to be more prominent than others, including an emphasis on unity and participation, at least among well-watched television programs and the political campaigning of the *Unione*. The aforementioned primaries were the signal political event in this context, involving more than 4 million Italians and offering bottom-up legitimacy to Prodi, who won 74% of the vote. This legitimacy was key to Prodi's ability to present himself as the head of a unified front of nine diverging parties, ranging from Catholic centrists to orthodox communists and beyond. Political or social participation was also at the heart of several of my fictional programs for the season in question, in particular *L'Uomo che sognava con le aquile*, a mini-series dedicated, in part, to collaborative action against elite interests, in this case the development plans of a northern Italian magnate, Bortolotti (a likely nod to Berlusconi himself).¹³¹ The "evil tycoon" antagonist was also prevalent in several other fictional programs I discuss; importantly, Berlusconi himself sought to distance himself from the tycoon image, most notably in his vicious attack on Italy's economic elite at the *Confindustria* (the major Italian employer's group) conference in March of 2006, as discussed in greater detail below.

Berlusconi's solution to the alleged "elite" problem was mostly his self-devised promise to cut a number of taxes. In the final three days of the campaign, he promised to abolish a different tax each day. The most notable of these was his vow, made during his final debate with Prodi on April 3, to abolish the *Ici*, or *Imposta comunale sugli immobili*, a local property tax. Notably, however, in a prime example of single-issue campaigning, Berlusconi also promised to abolish the *Irap*, *Imposta regionale sulle attività produttive*, a type of value-added tax (April 4), and the *Tarsu*, *tassa per lo smaltimento dei rifiuti solidi urbani*, a type of refuse tax (April 5), in the following days (the vote was held April 6). Such promises were clear examples of the negative freedom that Paul Ginsborg has highlighted as a central aspect of the Berlusconi project.

Such negative freedom takes the form, in Berlusconi's discourse, of the keyword "*libertà*", or freedom, intended as the "freedom from" regulations, limits, taxes, and other curtailings of personal and/or private initiative. Borrowing this concept from Isaiah Berlin, Ginsborg has connected it to the theme of competition in Berlusconi's commercial and political narratives. Society, including politics, must be structured so as to allow, to the greatest extent possible, competition, in services, choices, etc. Ginsborg has correctly noted that it is this conception of "freedom," and not democracy, that is at the core of Berlusconi's ideal socio-cultural model. In this model, "positive freedoms," such as ethics, consideration of the collective, and other pro-active factors that contribute to a political, social, and cultural context of equality

¹³⁰ According to Fabrizio Lucherini, a third of RAI titles and a half of Mediaset productions in 2005-2006 were continuations of existing franchises. In theory, this is the type of long-term serial production, typical of more mature television markets, such as the U.S., that the Italian industry had lacked. It should be noted, however, that even returning programs like Montalbano or Rocca lack the true serial production, namely more or less weekly episodes for an entire season, that characterize most generalist television hits in the U.S. and other mature markets. Fabrizio Lucherini, "Stabilità dinamica. Analisi della stagione 2005-2006." In *Buonanno*, 2007.

¹³¹ "Bortolotti" are also a type of bean, perhaps an unflattering characterization of the magnate.

and genuine plurality, are given short shrift, and often looked at with suspicion, since traditionally associated with either the State or other collective institutions seen as potential threats to the individual “freedom” embraced by Berlusconi.¹³²

The center-left and several fictional programs of my study, including *L’uomo*, but also *Giovanni Paolo II* (John Paul II) and *Karol: Un uomo diventato Papa* (Karol: A Man Become Pope), biopics of the late Pope, as well as *Il mio amico Babbo Natale* (My Friend Santa Claus), an updated, and strange, version of Dickens’ *A Christmas Tale*, stressed the need for unity against problems, including the concentration of wealth, that threatened Italian society. Below I have outlined the aforementioned and the other relevant texts of my 2005-2006 sample, providing a very brief description of the program or event analyzed. In addition, where possible, I list its quantitative audience (for the television programs) and its most obvious significance for the respective spheres (television and campaigns) and for my research as a whole.

Television¹³³:

Title:	Channel: ¹³⁴	Aired:	Audience: ¹³⁵ (millions)	Share (%): ¹³⁶	Summary:
<i>Giovanni Paolo II</i>	RAI Uno	Nov. 27, 28, 2005	11.329	37.13-44.16	The life of John Paul II is told through a series of flashbacks that trace the future saint’s life from childhood to his death.
<i>Karol. Un uomo diventato Papa.</i>	Canale 5	April 18, 19, 2005	12.833	43.5-44.31	The life of John Paul II is followed from his university days in Krakow to his election as Pope in 1978. ¹³⁷
<i>L’uomo che sognava con</i>	RAI Uno	January 2, 3, 2006	9.252	32.43-38.4	The development plans of a cynical Northern

¹³² See Ginsborg’s *Silvio Berlusconi: Television, Power, and Patrimony* (London: Verso, 2004), 3-6 and the Introduction to his co-edited volume with Enrica Asquer, *Berlusconismo: analisi di un sistema di potere* (Rome: Laterza, 2011), XXII-XXV. In this latter publication Ginsborg cites Berlin’s “Two Concepts of Liberty,” a 1958 essay, found in his *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969).

¹³³ This information comes from the respective program profiles in Buonanno, 2007, 177 (*Giovanni Paolo II*); 182 (*L’uomo*); 202 (*Montalbano*); 206 (*Rocca*); 162 (*Babbo Natale*).

¹³⁴ During the time period in question, the primary national television channels in Italy were the public *RAI Uno*, *RAI Due*, and *RAI Tre*, and Berlusconi’s Mediaset channels: *Canale 5*, *Rete 4*, and *Italia Uno*. The flagship channels, generally reserved for the most anticipated mainstream productions were, and are, *Rai Uno* and *Canale 5*, respectively.

¹³⁵ “Audience” refers to the average number of viewers for a given program in the season.

¹³⁶ “Share” refers to the percentage of all Italian television viewers that were watching a given program during its airing.

¹³⁷ *Karol* technically falls outside of the chronological limit set for my sample set, since it aired in the spring of 2005, before the Fall-Spring 2005-2006 television and campaign seasons officially began. Because of its similarity to its RAI cousin *Giovanni Paolo II*, and because of its commercial and artistic relevance (very high ratings and generally favorable reviews by critics), however, I have decided to include the program in my analysis of the 2005-2006 seasons. The program’s statistics are taken from Milly Buonanno, ed. *Le radici e le foglie: la fiction italiana, l’Italia nella fiction: anno diciassettesimo*. Vol. 2. (Rome: Rai-ERI, 2006), 199.

<i>le aquile:</i>					Italian businessman are thwarted by Rocco, a southern cheesemaker.
<i>Il commissario Montalbano</i>	RAI Uno	Sept. 22, 29, 2005; March 7, 13, 2006	8.589	30.43-33.23	Montalbano helps to restore order in provincial Sicily by solving cases linked to human trafficking, the mafia, and political blackmail.
<i>Il maresciallo Rocca 5</i>	RAI Uno	Oct. 2, 3, 9, 16, 17, 23, 2005	7.62525.18-32.10		Rocca solves cases relating to athletic doping, incestual affairs, euthanasia, and satanic cults.
<i>Il mio amico Babbo Natale</i>	Canale 5	December 19, 2005	7.948	32.77	A heartless and selfish Milanese industrialist is brought to his senses in a takeoff of Dickens' <i>A Christmas Story</i> .

Politics:

Item:	Summary:
The primaries to select the leader of the The <i>Unione</i>.	Romano Prodi, who had insisted on the primary as a condition for his participation in the center-left project, won the contest decisively, earning 74% of the vote.
The House of Freedoms (<i>Casa delle libertà</i>, Berlusconi's center-right coalition) political platform	The House of Freedom's platform called for lower taxes, investment in infrastructure and in the "traditional" family, and judicial reforms meant to de-politicize the Italian legal system.
Berlusconi's television March 12, 2006 interview with journalist Lucia Annunziata on the program <i>In mezz'ora</i>	After a series of brusque back-and-forth questions, answers, and accusations, Berlusconi abruptly walked off the set when Annunziata failed to give him the questions and time to answer them that he desired.
Berlusconi's speech at the Italian industrialists' (<i>Confindustria</i>) conference of March 18, 2006:	After initially communicating that he would be unable to attend the conference, Berlusconi appeared and launched into a spirited, apparently spontaneous diatribe against the left and against <i>Confindustria</i> itself, including some of its more famous members.
Berlusconi's speech at the Italian Commercial Association (<i>Confcommercio</i>) conference of April 4	Berlusconi laced an otherwise sober speech with a controversial phrase wherein would-be Prodi voters were called "assholes;" this soundbyte garnered him much media attention.
The series of televised debates between Prodi and Berlusconi	In two televised debates, Prodi and Berlusconi clashed on a wide range of issues, from the political

	to the personal.
The Center-Left’s “Platform Factory” (<i>Fabbrica del programma</i>):	From an operative center near Bologna, the <i>Unione</i> brought together various constituencies, political and civic, of its likely and potential electorate, to craft the coalition’s 281 page political platform.

Protagonists

The principal protagonists of the 2005-2006 election and television seasons escape easy categorization. As in 2000-2001, however, certain attributes are common to several protagonists of my sample. The trend towards approachable, “*alla mano*” heroes continued in 2005-2006, with both political and fictional figures behaving in ways that underline their attachment, real or imagined, to the “common man.”¹³⁸ At the same time, these protagonists were also quite normal themselves: vulnerable to fears, doubts, and mistakes, and, in Berlusconi’s case, the use of informal and at times vulgar language. *Il Cavaliere*’s opponent in the 2006 election, Romani Prodi, also presented himself as down-to-earth, though, as will be discussed later in this chapter, his “*alla mano*” persona could best be described as a type of affectionate grandfather figure, or a type of “rural” wise man bringing common sense to complex problems.

Another notable aspect of most, though not all, of the protagonists of my sample is their positioning as outsiders. While such positioning is not new in either politics or popular narrative, in Italy or elsewhere, what strikes this observer of the 2005-2006 seasons is the “outsider” portrayal of what could certainly be considered establishment figures. Montalbano, though the head of a provincial police station, is notoriously distant, geographically and professionally, from his superiors, a situation that is reflected in his unorthodox methods. Rocco carries the “maverick” label less than Montalbano, but his superiors also represent the established order against which his intuitions and general faith in humanity (giving people a second chance, the benefit of the doubt, etc.) are framed and celebrated. In *L’uomo che sognava con le aquile*, Terrence Hill’s stock character—the unassuming hero of the *provincia italiana*—is transferred out of the priestly robes of Don Matteo, his most famous role (at least in recent years) and into the tattered clothes of *Rocco Ventura* (his name, “Rocky fortune” is a rather obvious allusion to his personal journey), a rural cheesemaker at odds with the prevailing politics, technologies, and fellow artisans in his small Calabrian town.¹³⁹ John Paul II, in the two biopics I examine here, is

¹³⁸ “Fictional” is an imperfect term. I have put quotes around the word because certain protagonists from this season’s set are representations of actual historical figures. In this sense, they are clearly not “fictional,” but dramatized. In this study I have largely borrowed the Italian term “fiction” to refer to those televised formats that offer dramatized accounts of given events (TV-movies, mini-series, etc.). In order to avoid overly awkward language in repeatedly describing these groups of texts, I have chosen to lump stories of non-fictional figures together with their fictional counterparts. This is not a perfect organizational move, and is not a strict comparison of “apples and apples.” Nonetheless, when considering the wider expansion and importance of domestic dramatic or comedic programs in Italian television, programs centered around fictional or non-fictional heroes have served the same regenerative function of Italian television (helping to improve overall ratings and increasing the productive credibility for the broadcasters), and have similarly, as discussed throughout much of this dissertation, evinced similar “formal” characteristics (political or moral messaging, quality of production values, general level of plot sophistication, etc.).

¹³⁹ *Don Matteo* is a popular Italian series that features Hill as a local priest in Gubbio, Italy (a small provincial town in the *Umbria* region.). Beyond offering guidance to his parishioners, Matteo frequently solves local crimes. The show has consistently been one of the most watched programs on Italian television since its inception in 2000. It airs on *Rai Uno*.

also framed as an outsider throughout his career. He is first a young, relatively progressive, reform-minded theologian — confirmed, in both the miniseries, by his rather frank discussion of sexuality and his bold politics — and later, even as Pope, he is shown to be the outsider in a world dominated by strife and commercialism — a heroic voice speaking out against the status quo of contemporary society.

The “outsider” was also prevalent in the political side of my study, though in somewhat ambivalent ways. Prodi, a longtime manager of large state companies and later Prime Minister of Italy, was portrayed as “returning” to Italy after his time as head of the European Commission (1999-2004). A return necessarily implies a previous presence, and so can be applied with difficulty to an “outsider;” yet this is how Prodi was presented to the public. It was in part this ambiguity of Prodi’s status, reinforced by his not belonging to any political party, that allowed him to present himself, and be accepted as, the unifying figure of a fragmented political coalition. Unity was one of the problems of the 2005-2006 political and television seasons, and in this instance, the Italian left resolved its unity problem by bringing in a nominal outsider; a similar scenario was the case in *L’uomo che sognava con le aquile*, and to a lesser degree the John Paul II productions. I discuss the specifics of these political situations and programs fully in the “Problems” section of this chapter.

Berlusconi and his fictional avatars further complicate these ideas of “unity” and the “outsider.” In 2006, Berlusconi could not, realistically, portray himself as an outsider. He had been head of the Italian government, with a large majority in parliament, for five years. He also maintained his preeminent economic position within the country, still ranking as one of the richest men in Italy (with a personal fortune worth billions of euros), and maintaining de facto control of a large media empire with dominant or significant positions in Italian television, cinema, and print media. Yet Berlusconi presented himself as the rogue champion of the people in the 2006 campaign, the defender of the common man against the alliance of Italian industrialists and national media interests allegedly united against him. I describe this story arc in greater detail below, but here it should be noted that fictional “Berlusconis,” “Bortolotti” from Brescia in *L’uomo*, and a heartless Milanese industrialist in *Il mio amico Babbo Natale*, fulfill opposing functions in their respective tales. In *L’uomo*, Bortolotti is an outsider who brings potential ruin to a local community; he does not consider the interests of the local town and is intent on a profit at all costs; he does not change, and can be seen as one of the antagonists of the miniseries. In *Babbo Natale*, Achille Malerba, the Milanese industrialist, is the protagonist, and is transformed from a greedy and heartless villain into a happy and loving friend, husband, and adopted father to the “common person” (though he retains some of the heroic qualities that set him apart).¹⁴⁰ This televised hostility towards the tycoon (at least in the programs considered here) was also present in the political sphere in 2005-2006. Surprisingly, Berlusconi’s campaign is perhaps the best example of this anti-magnate rhetoric.

¹⁴⁰ Some observers might be quick to notice that the favorable treatment of the tycoon comes from a Mediaset (Berlusconi) produced film. Such a framing would be too simplistic, however. *L’uomo* was approved, on some level, by Berlusconi men, produced as it was, by the RAI, during the Berlusconi government (and the direct links between Berlusconi and the head of RAI fiction during this period, Agostino Saccà, were made evident during the “RAI Fiction” scandal, wherein Berlusconi sought to place female friends in fictional programs such as those studied here. Finally, while Berlusconi has not necessarily had a light hand in censoring criticism of himself or his government (as seen by the “*editto bulgaro*,” in which Enzo Biagi, Michele Santoro, and Daniele Luttazzi were harshly criticized by Berlusconi, and shortly after removed from RAI programming), he has been somewhat open to (or perhaps unaware? of) comedic critiques of him or his interests, at least as offered by Mediaset programs like *Striscia la notizia* or *Zelig*.

Politics

Il Cavaliere started his campaign for reelection as part of a multi-pronged effort. Gianfranco Fini (AN), Pierferdinando Casini (UDC), and Roberto Calderoli (Northern League) were also featured campaigners for the *Casa delle Libertà*. The main thrust of these leaders' messaging was the defense of the Berlusconi government's five years in office. As it became clear that this strategy yielded modest results (the center-left coalition maintained a statistically significant advantage throughout this stage of the campaign), Berlusconi unilaterally abandoned this strategy and reframed the election around the question of taxes — they would be raised under a center-left government, lowered if he and his coalition were reelected. Berlusconi managed to make taxes an emotional element in this revised strategy, and his language and behavior towards his opponents and towards the press exemplified the populist aspects of his campaign.¹⁴¹ The most pertinent examples of this style were Berlusconi's intervention at the 2006 *Confindustria* conference, his speech at the *Confcommercio* conference several weeks later, and his famous interview, or lack thereof, with Lucia Annunziata of the RAI on March 12, 2006.

Berlusconi was originally not scheduled to appear at the *Confindustria* conference of March 17-18 in Vicenza, due to a proclaimed back problem. Despite not feeling well, however, Berlusconi attended the conference, bringing along 300 followers for audience support. What ensued was an impressive diatribe against the left, the media, Italian prosecutors, *Confindustria* itself, and fellow Italian tycoon Diego Della Valle.¹⁴² Berlusconi began his performance by disregarding the time limit imposed on him by the conference's moderator, arguing that what he was saying was important for "*la gente*," and therefore more important than any conference decorum.¹⁴³ Discussed in greater detail below, both these elements — the proclaimed desire to speak to and on behalf of "the people," and the need to ignore established rules or decorum to do so — were prominent aspects of Berlusconi's participation in his series of debates with Prodi and his televised interview with journalist Lucia Annunziata.¹⁴⁴

Once in the spotlight, Berlusconi proceeded to stand and animatedly address the audience as if at a campaign rally, walking back and forth, responding to audience applause, raising his voice, and denouncing the pessimism of both the left and its newspapers, as well as the criticism laid against his government by *Confindustria*. This style, already familiar to followers of Berlusconi, is described in 2001's *Una storia italiana* as the *Cavaliere's* "*discorsi a braccetto*," or improvised speeches. In such moments, Berlusconi riffs off of a couple of pre-prepared points and the reactions of his audience to weave together what is usually a fairly coherent (internally) and passionate case for his point of view.

¹⁴¹ Donatella Campus, "Campaign Issues and Themes." *The Italian General Election of 2006: Romano Prodi's Victory*. Ed. James L. Newell (New York: Manchester University Press, 2007), 137-149.

¹⁴² "Lo 'show' di Berlusconi divide gli industriali." *Corriere della Sera*, March 19, 2006. http://www.corriere.it/Primo_Piano/Politica/2006/03_Marzo/19/berlusconi.shtml (last accessed October 22, 2012).

¹⁴³ An approximately seven-minute excerpt of Berlusconi's intervention can be seen at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Fl_p81Brxw (last accessed October 22, 2012).

¹⁴⁴ In concluding his first debate with Prodi, Berlusconi actually criticized the format of the debate itself, which allowed for questions by journalists followed by a response and subsequently a rebuttal from both candidates, within specific time limits, because it prevented him from addressing the issues in the depth that he would have desired, and also precluded him from responding to Prodi directly. His complaint, of course, was delivered as a form of regret for the "people," for whom he was unable to completely articulate the gravity of the issues at hand, and the need to vote for his coalition.

To refute his critics, from both the left and *Confindustria*, Berlusconi listed a series of statistics regarding automobile and cell phone ownership and stock market value to underscore one of his central points, that there was no economic crisis, only the “*sinistra con i suoi giornali che inventa una crisi che non esiste per arrivare al potere*” (“the Left with its newspapers that invents a crisis that doesn’t exist to come to power.”) This leftist manipulation was labeled as a threat to democracy. Berlusconi then took his outsider, adversarial approach to a new level when he suggested that Della Valle, present in the audience, must have supported the Italian left because he had numerous “skeletons in the closet” and needed the protection of leftist prosecutors. When Della Valle was given the opportunity to respond to Berlusconi, the latter snidely requested that he address him, as the Italian Prime Minister, with the *Lei*, or formal form of address, rather than the informal, or *tu*, form of address, provoking mixed reactions of applause and boos from the audience.¹⁴⁵

This rogue approach to campaigning was further exemplified several weeks later at the April 4 *Confcommercio* conference in Rome. Mostly reading a prepared speech to the association’s members (business owners and professionals involved in the service economy), Berlusconi famously noted that he had too much respect for the intelligence of Italians to believe that there were enough “assholes” (or “dickheads, depending on how the word “coglioni” is translated) that would vote against their own interests to allow a center-left victory in the upcoming election (“*Perché ho troppa stima dell’intelligenza degli italiani per pensare che ci siano in giro così tanti coglioni che possano votare facendo il proprio disinteresse.*”) Berlusconi subsequently described his language as “coarse but effective” (“*rozzo ma efficace*”).¹⁴⁶

Prior to these performances, Berlusconi had evinced similar “outsider” sentiments and actions in the March 12 episode of the RAI Tre program “*In mezz’ora*,” conducted by Lucia Annunziata. After declaring that 85% of the major media outlets were controlled by major business interests with leftist, or at least anti-Berlusconi sympathies, Berlusconi called Annunziata “*una violenta*” (a violent person) because she would not allow him to speak without interruption about the arguments of his choice. Again here Berlusconi framed his rhetoric as the important things the Italian public needed to know, but which he was impeded from explaining because of Annunziata’s inappropriate behavior; Annunziata, of course, was described by Berlusconi on air as prejudiced and leftist. Notably, and in-line with *Il Cavaliere*’s aforementioned lines of discourse, when Annunziata asked him why *Confindustria* and *Corriere della Sera*, perhaps the most important Italian daily, and traditionally centrist or conservative in its endorsements, were opposed to another government led by him, Berlusconi stated that it must have been because his government had taken actions on behalf of all Italians, and not a few privileged interests. He then, in a familiar rhetorical strategy, listed off a series of statistics meant to underscore his government’s activity on behalf of the public.

This tactic was also on display in the election debates, where Berlusconi inadvertently shed light on his belief in statistics. In response to a Prodi criticism of his involvement of women in government and in the economy, Berlusconi, unsurprisingly, rattled off a series of statistics

¹⁴⁵ The “respect” question also emerged in Berlusconi’s debates with Prodi. While Berlusconi repeatedly presented himself as a victim of undecorous personal assaults by the left, in contrast to the respectful tones he claimed to use when discussing Prodi, the most notable “respect” moment of the debate is discussed later in this section, describing Prodi’s framing of Berlusconi’s use of statistics, and the latter’s response.

¹⁴⁶ Enrico Marro, “‘Coglioni.’ Berlusconi va all’attacco, poi frena.” *Corriere della Sera*, April 5, 2006.

http://archiviostorico.corriere.it/2006/aprile/05/Coglioni_Berlusconi_all_attacco_poi_co_9_060405091.shtml

relating to women's place in both spheres during his tenure, finishing his rhetorical flourish with: "This is the truth and the truth is made of numbers." (Questa è la verità e la verità è fatta di cifre"). Prodi would later criticize such overbearing, and instrumental use of quantitative measuring, to Berlusconi's superficial dismay. In response to a standard Berlusconi statistical assault, Prodi noted that Berlusconi used statistics like a drunk uses a lightpost — not to see clearly, but to prop himself up. Berlusconi intentionally understood the quip literally, interrupting Prodi (not permitted by the debate format) to proclaim his offense at being called a drunk, especially as Italian prime minister.

Berlusconi had similar problems with decorum and program format during his interview with Annunziata. When the journalist continued to press Berlusconi on questions not of his choosing, Berlusconi protested, leading Annunziata to curtly note that the program was "her house" and that she would be asking the questions.¹⁴⁷ In a move reminiscent of his 2001 treatment of *Raggio verde's* host Michele Santoro, Berlusconi seized this moment to frame Annunziata as just another leftist journalist abusing the public airwaves, describing her as such as he famously left the stage and abandoned the interview with ample time left in the program.¹⁴⁸ That Berlusconi later showed this video footage at a campaign rally that same day gives some indication that this general line of behavior, if not the specifics, had been planned. The event also underscores Berlusconi's repeated use of such "spontaneous" actions as a bastardized form of a media event, a soundbite moment meant to occupy the news cycle and set the short-term political and media agenda.

In his campaign Prodi also sought to be seen as in touch with the people. The most innovative means to this end was the *Fabbrica del programma*, or "Platform Factory." Prodi's inner circle rented and then renovated a former industrial warehouse outside of Bologna, turning the space into a forum for debates and discussions between a fluid stream of non-profit groups, industry leaders, academic experts, and other practitioners or direct participants in a variety of key economic and social issues. While Prodi would later take to the road in a bigrig tour of the peninsula, a symbol of him going to the people, in this case this idea was turned on its head. Civil society came to Prodi, making the *Fabbrica* a centralized point of exchange between and for various layers of the public and representatives of Prodi's political team. The *Fabbrica* thus allowed Prodi and the left to offer their work as a democratic activity, giving voice to numerous parts of the public that otherwise may not have been heard. This trend towards the involvement of the average voter, at least the average center-left supporter, continued with center-left's primary election to choose the head of its coalition.

Prodi won this primary handsomely, gaining legitimacy not only among his partied allies (Prodi was not an official member of the any of the center-left parties that he represented), but also credibility with the center-left base. At the same time, Prodi solved, or appeared to solve, one of the political problems of the *Unione*, unity. Unity, both among the left and in Italy in general, was a key theme of Prodi's campaign, especially in his televised debates with

¹⁴⁷ Again here, as in his debates with Prodi, Berlusconi was frustrated by his inability to control the direction of discourse and respond spontaneously, as discussed earlier. This interview between Berlusconi and Annunziata was especially painful for this observer to watch: neither politician nor journalist respected the other, personally, or professionally, and this was very evident in their brusque and often childlike behavior.

¹⁴⁸ As discussed in Chapter 2 of this dissertation, Berlusconi called-in to Santoro's RAI program during the 2001 election season. When Santoro refused to speak with him and asked that the telephone connection be cut, Berlusconi criticized the journalist's behavior and told him that he was a public employee and that he should "control himself" ("si contenga!").

Berlusconi (the latter was eager to paint Prodi as a mere frontman for a factitious and uncontrollable coalition), and in *Ci sarà un'Italia* (“There Will Be One Italy”) the book he released in January of 2006, just as the formal election season began to near.¹⁴⁹

After the primary election, the *Unione* sought to keep the political momentum through its *Incontriamoci* (“Let’s meet”) initiative. Inspired by the successful internet politicking of Howard Dean in the 2004 U.S. presidential election, the *Incontriamoci* campaign allowed members of the public to organize local meetings of fellow “average” voters through a website similar to Meetup, a website that allows for strangers to organize in-person meetings around a preferred theme or topic (such Meetup meetings had been an important part of Dean’s failed campaign for the Democratic nomination). *Incontriamoci* encouraged *Unione* supporters to invite other members of the public to their homes or public spaces to discuss the upcoming elections. According to one of the brains behind *Incontriamoci*, between 25,000 to 50,000 individuals took part in the initiative.¹⁵⁰

The *Fabbrica*, the primary, and the *Incontriamoci* initiative all showcased central ideas of the center left’s 2006 effort, including political innovation and a desire to bring the political process more directly to the people. Prodi’s self-presentation during the election campaign complemented these ideas. Like Berlusconi, Prodi repeatedly sought to frame complex issues in simple, relatable terms. Where, however, Berlusconi could best be described as eloquent and well-spoken (when not intentionally vulgar), Prodi was fairly folksy and “homey.” Berlusconi himself recognized this appeal of Prodi, describing him as a “*curato bonario*,” or a jovial, well-cultured person. This “wise” and warm bearing lent familiarity to the innovative politics of the *Unione*. Part of this simple, direct presentation included Prodi’s manner in the campaign debates, as well as his vessel of choice for the by now mandatory tour of the Italian peninsula, a yellow big-rig truck.¹⁵¹

Fiction

A trend towards the humble was also readily apparent in much of the fictional programming of 2005-2006 considered here. Aside from the previously discussed (in Chapter 2) *Montalbano* and *Rocca*, who continued to be their modest and humane selves in the 2005-2006 season, the protagonists of the series, mini-series, and television-movies of the season also tended to be *alla mano* defenders of the general public. In the RAI biography of **Giovanni Paolo**

¹⁴⁹ Romano Prodi, with Furio Colombo. *Ci sarà un'Italia. Dialogo sulle elezioni più importanti per la democrazia italiana*. (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2006).

¹⁵⁰ Giulio Santagata. *La Fabbrica del programma: Dieci anni di Ulivo verso il Partito democratico. Conversazione con Lelio Alfonso; Postfazione di Romano Prodi* (Roma: Donzelli, 2006), 107-114. *Incontriamoci* is also discussed in a brief “ethnographic” study by Simone Esposito: “Incontriamoci: il social network alla bolognese.” *ComunicaLab.it*, 2007. <http://www.comuniclab.it/23637/incontriamoci-il-social-network-alla-bolognese>. Accessed September 2012. Esposito and his colleagues attended approximately 20 *Incontriamoci* meetings, noting that attendees were generally already likely *Unione* voters, middle-aged, and at times already knew each other through existing associations or as neighbors.

¹⁵¹ The bigrig truck, which set out from Rome on September 7 before arriving in Naples on October 14, as well as the “*Fabbrica*” (“Factory”) clearly underline the center-left’s attempt to position itself as the representative of the working class. The truck, in particular, represents an update in a somewhat stale but perhaps still useful tradition of the center-left in the post-Tangentopoli era: the tour of the peninsula in some form of customized “public” transportation: in 1996 Prodi toured Italy in a bus; in 2001 Rutelli did so in a train. Interestingly, Berlusconi opted for a cruiseship when he toured the peninsula before the 1999 Italian regional elections.

II, the recently deceased Pope is immediately characterized as in touch with his lay subordinates, asking about his bodyguards' children and other minutiae of the lives of the non-clerical staff he passes on his way to St. Peter's square in the opening minutes of the film, shortly before the attempt on his life by Mehmet Ali Ağca. From there, through flashbacks to his youth to more contemporary scenes of his life as Pope, John Paul II is repeatedly pictured as not only in-touch with, but on the side of the everyman: in his youth, one of his chief friends and interlocutors is an uneducated quarry laborer; as an ordained priest and professor of ethics, he is shown spending more time with his students in informal and direct conversation than in any type of lecture; as a newly elected Pope, he famously speaks of "our" language (Italian) and encourages the crowd hanging on his every word to correct him when he makes mistakes; and finally, as Pope, in two examples among many, he takes the time to meet and later marry a young couple randomly encountered on the streets of Rome, and to take a break from his wanderings through a forest to share a glass of wine with an unkempt vagrant. Mediaset's own biography, *Karol: Un uomo diventato Papa* (Karol: A Man Who Became Pope), also, as suggested by its title, shares the same tactic as its RAI cousin.¹⁵² From his offering of a jacket to a poor child on a march to flee the Nazis, to his argument in support of the centrality of the lay person in the Church's vision as an archbishop, to his very modest shoes at his first conclave, John Paul II is repeatedly portrayed as on the side of the common person, no matter what his own position.

The protagonist of *L'uomo che sognava con le aquile* continues this "common" trend, as does the hero of *Il mio amico Babbo Natale*, though to a lesser degree. In *L'uomo*, Terrence Hill is Rocco Ventura, a former missionary to Africa returned to his provincial hometown in Calabria, where he earns a living making the area's traditional cheese. When a northern developer announces plans to develop the rural area into a ski resort with posh apartments, Rocco's livelihood and the area's traditions are threatened. What follows is a classic, if convoluted and very strangely bureaucratic, battle of David vs. Goliath. In the end, Rocco manages to lead the everyday citizens of his village to victory against the intruding magnate, a triumph of the poor many against the privileged few.

In *Babbo Natale*, Dickens' *A Christmas Story* is mixed with an American-esque Santa Claus tale infused with technological and financial references and language to evince a rather superficial, and apparently adult-targeted, ode to the simple life of family and hard work. This ode is contrasted with the wealth and excess of several facets of the modern economy, in particular the exploitation associated with contemporary manufacturing and the cold calculations of global finance. Achille Malerba, a ruthless CEO played by Gerri Scotti, recognizes the failings of his gilded lifestyle with the help of a North Pole version of an elf, or an angel, played by Lino Banfi, and ultimately transforms himself, and his lucrative firm, into a force for good, extolling family values and respect for others. This ultimate transformation plays out within the context of Malerba's successful courting of a humble janitor of his firm and her son.

Rocco Ventura from *L'uomo* is also an outsider, living outside not only the rules of modern production, but also the collaborative work of the local cheese consortium. It is only when he enters into both simultaneously — modernizing his own production and distributing the consortium's product through the Internet — characterized as an innovative and new technology in the miniseries — with the assistance of other local producers — that stability and happiness return to their town, New Caledonia, and the threat of the evil tycoon, Bortolotti, removed. The

¹⁵² *Karol: Un uomo diventato Papa* was followed in May of 2006 by its continuation, *Karol: Un Papa rimasto uomo* ("Karol: The Pope, The Man") a two part Mediaset miniseries airing on Canale 5 (May 10 and 11, 6.3 million viewers, 23.3% share).

outsider status of Montalbano and Rocca is more tenuous than that of Rocco Ventura, since they are members of the law enforcement establishment. The fact that they are constantly portrayed as outside of the traditional tenets of their profession speaks to both a significant, though not universal Italian distaste for State institutions (as discussed in Chapter 2), and the occasional desire to see the limits of that State surpassed by heroic individuals. While this tension between the status quo of law enforcement and outsider protagonists is in some aspects structural, adding drama and complexity to a narrative, it does not necessarily have to be so; such tension could easily be reserved for the us vs. them encounters of the heroes and villains. The political tendency to rhetorically place oneself on the outside of the political establishment seems to underline the idea that this positioning resonates with Italian viewers, outside of pure considerations of dramatic tension.

Outside of the “popular” and “outsider” traits of the heroes discussed above, there were no clearly identifiable characteristics that united all, or most, of the protagonists of the 2005-2006 political and fictional seasons. Beyond being portrayed as an outsider, John Paul II intellectual gifts are also highlighted in his respective docudramas, but this aspect of Prodi (a professor and a technocrat before entering politics) was not emphasized in his campaign — likely a nod to the popular tone of the election season. In fact, this exaltation of culture, here intended as the arts as well as knowledge itself, was not present in the other texts considered here. While in the political context this might not surprise, Berlusconi, in the past, had often touted his cultural background as one of his “superman” qualities. Berlusconi was, and is, a notable optimist, and in 2006 he shared this trait with the John Paul II portrayed in the RAI and Mediaset miniseries. Rocca should also be seen as an optimist, but this characteristic is not found in the other protagonists considered here.

Problems

The principal problems of the political and fictional narratives of my survey similarly escape clear generalization. As with the protagonists of the 2005-2006 season, there were limited cross-overs, where a given problem was illustrated in several texts within and between the political and fictional paradigms, but there was no single problem that was present in all the texts of my study. Perhaps the closest thing to a universal problem in the 2005-2006 context was the pernicious effects of the power of economic elite, often embodied by the figure of an evil tycoon, in both political and fictional contexts. Berlusconi of course springs to mind here, but it should be remembered that he himself cast his antagonists as the wealthy interests that criticized him through “leftist” media outlets and *Confindustria*, the major employers’ group. As discussed above in relation to his performances at the *Confindustria* conference and earlier in his “interview” with *Annunziata* on *In mezz’ora*, Berlusconi was eager to indicate the pessimism and self-serving agenda of these corporate titans as the root of the purported economic problems of Italy; they had circulated stories of economic decline and government ineffectiveness because he, a champion of the average Italian, had governed on behalf of all Italians, and not to the specific interests of his wealthy detractors. At the *Confindustria* conference, Diego Della Valle, the wealthy patron of high-end fashion company Tod’s and the *Fiorentina* soccer team, became the personification of this problem, serving as a notable face on to which Berlusconi could pin these accusations.

The Italian left also picked up on this theme of the problematic tycoon, though their rhetoric was clearly focused on Berlusconi. The left, therefore, sought to turn Berlusconi’s

personalization of politics into accountability, squarely placing the blame for Italy's weak economy on his shoulders.¹⁵³ In his debates with Berlusconi, Prodi repeatedly asked where Berlusconi had been the last five years, ironically undercutting Berlusconi's mechanical attempts to place the blame for Italy's economic ills on the leftist government that had preceded him (Prodi was also quick to note that Berlusconi enjoyed an ample majority in the House of Deputies and Senate, and that there was therefore no real reason for him to point the blame anywhere else).

In the fictional sphere, both *L'uomo che sognava con le aquile* e *Il mio amico Babbo Natale* feature magnates from Lombardy that are depicted as capitalist vultures. In *L'uomo*, Bortolotti's sole interest in developing the pristine nature of New Caledonia is to secure the development funds of the European Union, after which he will abandon the project, leaving New Caledonia's citizens bereft of land rights and their artisanal cheesemaking traditions (the "*formaggio di grotta*"). Bortolotti's rhetoric is suffused with references to jobs and financial value, and his negligible interest in local culture is easily noted. In short, Bortolotti is the stereotypical evil tycoon: rich, abrasive, selfish, and physically unattractive. The progress and emphasis on money that he brings to New Caledonia are framed as what is wrong with the modern world.

In *Babbo Natale*, Gerri Scotti is Achille Malerba, a Milanese CEO of a condiment conglomerate that makes genetically-modified mayonnaise and ketchup. Though ultimately Malerba will be transformed into a decent human being, he spends much of the film as a conceited bully obsessed by profit and hedonistic satisfaction. Before his redemption, he fires workers at will, cheats on his wife, abuses his friends, and disregards any type of minimal product standards for his sauces. The name "Malerba" might also be an underhand way of indicating that the redeemed magnate is not so refined, but the overall cultural level of the film seems to suggest that the "Malerba" of the character's name might be an ironic comment on "Achille", showing that the impervious tycoon is vulnerable after all.¹⁵⁴ The dialogue of the film is loaded with financial metaphors, including the "Buon Jones Index" of good behavior and a "*bilancio del cuore*" ("budget of the heart.")

While the perils of greed and the purely market economy were not figuratively condensed into a single figure in the two John Paul mini-series, each version includes moments wherein the Pope denounces materialism and human exploitation. While this denunciation takes explicit form in John Paul II's 1995 speech to the UN General Assembly shown in the RAI's *Giovanni Paolo II*, it is present throughout both mini-series in the Pope's repeated denunciations and warnings about the communist threat. John Paul's concerns with communism spring not only from its hostility towards religion, but also its stark emphasis on the material here and now, with little concern for spiritual matters. This attack on communists was echoed, although in a completely different context, and for completely different reasons, by Berlusconi in the 2005-2006 season. Berlusconi cared little for matters spiritual, but found "communists" a useful label to describe the left's attempts to impinge any type of limitation on individual freedom.¹⁵⁵

This political and fictional importance given to evil tycoons and the emphasis on the negative effects of materialism found in the John Paul movies is interesting when we remember

¹⁵³ Campus, 144-146.

¹⁵⁴ These considerations might apply if the tycoon's last name is connected to Luigi Malerba (1927-2008), a noted experimental, and at times ironic, Italian author.

¹⁵⁵ Throughout his career Berlusconi has used "communist" as an epithet against his leftist opponents, regardless of the actual ideological persuasion of the parties in question.

that the primary concern of the 2005-2006 political campaign was the economy. Whether it was the overall poor performance of Italian industry (real or perceived), or Berlusconi's tactic of turning taxes into an emotional issue, economic matters were at the heart of the 2005-2006 campaign. These concerns were clearly present in the aforementioned fictional texts as well, but less prevalent in the other fictional texts of my study. Instead, these programs seem to deal primarily in eternal problems like organized crime (in *Rocca* and *Montalbano*, but notably absent from electoral rhetoric) and marital infidelity (*Rocca*, *Babbo Natale*), as well as more topical issues such as doping in sports (*Rocca*), immigration concerns (*Rocca*; overshadowed in the 2005-2006 political campaigns by wider economic fears), forged art (*Rocca*), and political cover-ups (*Montalbano*).

One last problem present in some of the programs and campaigns of 2005-2006 is unity. The left faced its own concerns about, and Berlusconi's constant accusations of, its lack of cohesion. At the same time, the fictional cheese producers of *L'uomo* are only successful when they and Rocco set aside their differences and work together as a consortium. In *Babbo Natale* it is the unity of the family that is first destroyed by greed and excess and then reconstituted by love, a theme reminiscent of the calls for social justice and spiritual unity made by John Paul II in the respective docudramas.

The 2005-2006 political and fictional materials examined here thus seem to confirm, while also adding nuance to, the political and fictional narrative trends discussed in the previous chapter. While specific anti-State rhetoric is less prevalent in my 2005-2006 texts, most of my protagonists portrayed themselves, or were portrayed as, outsiders to the political and economic establishment. This stance often included specific outside-the-State positioning (even when technically part of the State, i.e. *Rocca*, *Montalbano*), but also more general positioning as outside the normal circuits of power. This predilection for outsiders is similar, though not identical to, the "othering" associated with foreigners in the 2000-2001 seasons and the political and pop cultural "superman-ing" discussed in the previous chapter of this dissertation. Whereas non-Italians in that season were largely used as the scapegoat on to which Italian anxieties were projected, here the hopes for political and moral regeneration were appended to protagonists that were narratively constituted as outside existing power structures. This outsourcing of agency to heroes, broadly defined, is in-line with the supermen discussed earlier in this dissertation; however, in contrast to 19th and early 20th century heroes, and in sync with most protagonists of the 2000-2001 political and television seasons, these heroes were presented as "normal," with Berlusconi a particular case, as I discuss below. Of course, "negative othering," or the simplified casting of blame for general social and political ills on specific individuals or groups continued to occur in 2005-2006. Interestingly, in this season such othering seemed to coalesce around the figure of the tycoon.

The focus on such a figure would seem to disadvantage Berlusconi, yet he himself used this rhetoric to his apparent advantage. His populist stance was in-line with much of the fictional programming of 2005-2006. The campaigning of the center-left was less in sync with the fictional programs of my sample. While Prodi and his allies were quick to point out the deficiencies of the Berlusconi government, and hence firmly position the latter as a member of the political establishment, he was targeted to a lesser degree as a wealthy tycoon preying on the Italian public. To improve the Italian political and economic situation, the center-left again emphasized a type of choral protagonism, built around internal and then national unity. This strategy was in stark contrast to Berlusconi's one-man show, which helped transform a campaign that had been seen as a foregone conclusion into a very tight race.

Berlusconi and Prodi had more in common in their personal presentations to the public, though here too they differed. While never undercutting his own, or his government's achievements — frequently delivered, as discussed above in relation to the *Confindustria* conference, as record-breaking performances — Berlusconi also sought to be seen as somewhat normal, particularly through his selectively vulgar language. Such coarse language helped Berlusconi to cast himself as in-touch with “the guys” (as would his later tendency for sexual and sexist remarks) without negating his singular status. Prodi instead was never vulgar, and never shied away from his own previous achievements — an elite political/technocratic career if there ever were one — but shaped his “normalcy” around a folksy simplicity and calm not typically associated with Italian political and economic elites. The “fictional” heroes of my sample were more similar to Prodi than Berlusconi in these respects. These figures were regularly defined as simple and humble heroes. The folksy aspect of Rocco Ventura — an artisanal cheese producer initially immune to modern methods, and the “earthy,” nostalgic “goodness” of John Paul II are most indicative of this prominent character trait.

These aspects of the 2005-2006 political and television seasons highlight the deeper continuities and surface changes in political and fictional discourses in Italy in the Berlusconi era. Progressive political heroes, like most of their fictional counterparts, are keen to be seen as normal, while Berlusconi hints at normalcy while never playing down his own super status. Political and fictional heroes are also often presented as outsiders, even when such positioning is clearly absurd, most notably in the case of Berlusconi, as evidenced especially by his behavior in 2006: he ran a populist opposition campaign as the standing prime minister and dominant (and most wealthy) figure of Italian media.

Center-left candidates and Berlusconi similarly diverge in their rhetorical (and often real) political mobilization. Berlusconi is a one-man show, while the left prefers to build its message, at least rhetorically, around large-scale participation and various forms of solidarity. As discussed in Chapter 2, fictional television programs generally pay lip service to this idea, though in 2005-2006 it appears that more sincere portrayals of such action were present in some programs, notably *L'uomo* and to a lesser degree the John Paul II miniseries. While its importance should not be overstated, it is worth remembering that *L'uomo's* emphasis on horizontal solidarity and collaborative action overlapped with the *Unione's* primaries, *Fabbrica del programma*, and *Incontriamoci* initiatives.

Italian Politics and Popular Culture in the Present

The previous chapter contextualized the 2000-2001 relationship between election campaigns and televised fiction vertically, or chronologically, with respect to past iterations of the politics-popular culture relationship in Italy, particularly in regard to heroes, foreigners, and institutions. Here I would like to offer a “horizontal” contextualization of my 2005-2006 findings, placing the aforementioned aspects of the campaign-fictional programs dynamic in relation to two other notable areas of contemporary Italian popular culture: the tabloid and soccer press. In line with the approach used in my analysis thus far, I will consider the protagonists and the problems of a small sample of these texts' narratives. With this information in hand, it will be possible to design a more detailed map of the contemporary relationship between politics and popular culture in Italy.

Tabloids

As vehicles for the massive and facile promotion of notable individuals within Italy, magazines such as *Chi*, *TV sorrisi e canzoni* (both published by Berlusconi's Mondadori), and *Gente* (published by Hearst Magazines International) are optimal sources for an exploration of the protagonists and related problems of popular culture in contemporary Italy. Below I examine issues of the aforementioned publications from the summer of 2012, attempting to establish the general contours of the protagonists and problems of this important aspect of Italian popular culture.¹⁵⁶ This research is not scientifically representative of the entire gossip field; nonetheless, the general stylistic and content similarities among such publications (heavy on photos, light on text, rather simplistic commentary, focus on skin and scandal), mean that a quick examination of this small sample of texts can still be a useful indicator of the general trends and themes of the sector.

In the editions I examine, *Chi* and *Gente* are largely indistinguishable, aside from their treatment of Berlusconi, discussed below. Both magazines go to great length to showcase as much skin as possible, and focus their attention on the posings and pastimes of royal, business, and cultural VIPs. In *Chi*, Federica Pellegrini, an Italian swimmer favored to win a gold medal in the then forthcoming London Olympics, is the focus of suggestive swimsuit shots and sexual-themed discussions (jokes about sexual abstinence before athletic performance, the possibility of loving a woman) that seem mostly irrelevant to her athletic fame. In *Gente*, another Olympian, fencer Valentina Vezzali, is pictured in various sports bras, never her fencing kit or even typical non-athletic clothes. This same treatment continues for various other personalities, men and women, including athletes such as Mario Balotelli (discussed below). When not focusing on skin, both *Chi* and *Gente* shine their lights on the rich and famous (from William and Kate to the Monaco royals to Middle Eastern dynasties newly prominent in the West), in posed images meant for personal promotion and in "caught-in-the-act" shots meant to titillate the reader's interest for celebrities' "real" lives.

TV sorrisi e canzoni differs slightly from the aforementioned parameters. Skin is much less prominent in the magazine (even the cover of the issue examined, featuring male swimmer/hearthrob Filippo Magnini, covers the "hunk" in a modest Polo shirt), and even the magazine's text, much more prominent than that of the other publications', actually focuses on showbusiness stars in the context of their professions, and not their personal lives. While it is not the place of this dissertation to examine why *TV sorrisi e canzoni* differs from the general "gossip" path, the fact that it does underlines the deliberate editorial choices behind the designs of magazines such as *Chi* and *Gente*.

The problems showcased in *Chi* and *Gente* are primarily emotional and sensational. That is not to say there are numerous or significant problems in these publications. Rather, life, in general, and specifically that of the VIPs highlighted in these tabloids' pages, seems relatively pleasant and carefree. But there are a few bumps in the road, which are, as mentioned above, largely emotional in nature, and often sensational. The *Gente* issue in question features articles on the forlorn family lives of Hollywood actress Demi Moore (her daughters repudiate her after her behavior following her split from actor Ashton Kucher) and Italian television star Antonella Clerici (she is happy only with her young daughter, while her partner is nowhere to be found), as

¹⁵⁶ The issues in question are *Chi di noi settimanale*, n. 30. Mondadori. July 25, 2012 (referred to here, and in general, as "Chi;" *TV sorrisi e canzoni*, n. 30. Mondadori, July 21-27, 2012; *Gente*, n. 31. Hearst Magazines International, July 28, 2012.

well the continued problems of Annamaria Franzoni (of the noted Cogne murder case), who will lose her house after failing to pay her celebrity lawyer. *Chi* appears to be largely problem-free, though it could be argued that showgirl Raffaella Fico's pregnancy, by a Mario Balotelli uninterested in resuming a relationship with her, is presented as somewhat problematic for the young woman; of course, however, the story focuses on the positive side of the situation, not the negative — in Mario's absence "*la Fico*" can count on the reassuring support of her family. *TV sorrisi e canzoni* similarly appears to be a problem-free zone, though its optimism towards all aspects of life is less emphatic than that of *Chi*; in its reporting of the happy stories of entertainment's stars it is simply more matter-of-fact, and less hagiographic than Berlusconi's flagship gossip publication.

How is Berlusconi himself presented in these respective magazines? Unsurprisingly, his treatment follows ownership lines. *Chi* offers the by-then-former Prime Minister a flattering spread. Berlusconi is featured in photos with the business and political elite of Rome at a high-end party; the piece's text is dedicated both to Berlusconi's reformulated political plans, which hit on the well-worn themes of taxes and the family, as well as his disciplined efforts to get in shape: after jogging every morning (at six A.M. we are later told), he has lost five kilos with the intention of losing another eight by the end of the summer.¹⁵⁷ Berlusconi's announced physical regeneration is a metaphor for his attempted political comeback, which depends in part on his limiting the damage from his private life (hence the image of the sober and disciplined leader — he does not drink cocktails at the party and heads home before most other guests). The piece, a clear case of sentimental propaganda, casts Berlusconi as a member of the elite in touch with the everyday realities of most Italians, and in-line with the body-conscious ethic of *Chi* and similar publications. The "candid" nature of the photos themselves lend Berlusconi an air of "reality" that complements his at times clearly posed and polished pieces of visual propaganda.

That the entire article was a bit of political kite-flying is evidenced by Berlusconi's appearance next to Francesca Pascale, announced as his girlfriend in the fall of 2012, as well as the following spread in *Chi*, where one of Berlusconi's daughters, Barbara, is featured with her children, her ex-boyfriend (and father of her children), and Berlusconi's now ex-wife, Veronica (discreetly described as the "separated wife of Silvio Berlusconi").¹⁵⁸ This latter piece underlines the need for Berlusconi to clean-up the image of his private life — beyond the physical sobriety

¹⁵⁷ "Silvio Berlusconi: Abolieremo l'Imu ed Equitalia," pp. 44-48 ("Silvio Berlusconi: We'll Abolish the Local Property Tax and the Tax Authorities"). The emphasis on jogging and physical fitness is reminiscent of several sections of *Una storia italiana*, Berlusconi's tabloid-esque propaganda piece discussed in Chapter 2 of this dissertation. Berlusconi's body, as a rhetorical testament to his physical fitness, sexual virility, and aesthetic tastes, has repeatedly been at the center of his public persona. Such political-corporal symbolism is of course not unique to Berlusconi. As condensations of various discursive themes, leaders' bodies, especially with their "singular" status, i.e. they cannot be replicated, even in an intensely virtual era that we currently experience, and privileged media exposure, can be important political symbols. While such bodies can be used to comment on political matters and cultural values, they also offer onlookers a very simple, potentially instinctual and/or stereotypical, means to gauge a leader; this is especially the case in an image-saturated society, where representations of the leader's body are consistently circulated through the public sphere, and offer a chance for quick judgment at the expense of reasoned reflection. Among contemporary leaders, Sarkozy in France and Putin in Russia have been other charismatic populists keen to promote their bodies as means to promote their politics. In the Italian case, Sergio Luzzato, among others, has explored the symbolic importance during, and after, the life of Benito Mussolini in his *The Body of Il Duce* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2005), originally published as *Il corpo del duce* (Turin: Einaudi, 1998).

¹⁵⁸ "Barbara Berlusconi: Mamma che felicità!" 50-55.

discussed above, it is important for his family life to be seen as acceptable and not overly-damaged by sex scandals.

Gente dedicates a fairly objective, and mostly textual analysis to Berlusconi's chances of political renewal (only one small photo, a closeup of the deposed leader smiling).¹⁵⁹ Mario Cervi, a journalist previously employed by Berlusconi's daily *Il Giornale*, and the author of the brief comment, notes that Berlusconi likely will not return to his former glories, but that his leadership of the center-right will be decisive in determining the future direction of Italy. Cervi briefly discusses the displacement of Angelino Alfano, Berlusconi's designated heir, by the return of the *Cavaliere*, before considering the difficulties of Berlusconi's return, comparing him to Napoleon (a failed return after Waterloo) and then Juan Perón (a realized return from political exile). These snipes aside, Cervi's piece is fairly straightforward and, if nothing else, underlines just how much of a puff piece the *Chi* service is.

Soccer

Soccer, or "calcio," is a fundamental pillar of contemporary Italian culture. The game is played recreationally by millions of Italians, and many more consume its professional leagues (primarily, though not exclusively, its top two divisions, *Serie A* and *Serie B*) through televised matches and an apparently endless media apparatus — television, radio, Internet, press — dedicated to the sport. The importance of soccer in Italy has increased in the last thirty years, as the aforementioned mediatic consumption of the sport has consistently constituted one of the most important forms of content for the country's expanding consumption of various media (in particular television). A quick examination of soccer's most famous media outlet in Italy, *La Gazzetta dello Sport*, can give us an initial glance at the protagonists and problems of this important facet of contemporary Italian popular culture.

Noted in Italy and abroad for its pink pages, *La Gazzetta* is not the only producer of soccer news in Italy; *Tuttosport*, *Corriere dello Sport*, and other print publications compete for the same customers, while various televised programs and channels similarly fight for the sports fan's attention. Still, *La Gazzetta* remains the most storied publication dedicated to athletics in Italy. Anyone who picks up *La Gazzetta* or reads its online edition is treated to a symphony of sports news, mostly dedicated to soccer, with particular attention paid to the heroic exploits of this or that player (almost always male). Starting from this framework, below I seek to go a little deeper in analyzing the protagonists and problems of this sportsworld. I examine the presentation of two heroes of Italian sport in *La Gazzetta* on a random day: *AS Roma* striker Francesco Totti, and the controversial young talent of Berlusconi's *Milan*, Mario Balotelli. I recognize that such a treatment is not a scientific survey of soccer press content in Italy; still, as in the case of exploration of tabloid publications, the relatively stable characteristics of such publications mean that a small sampling can still be indicative of the general contours of the sector in general.¹⁶⁰

On this particular day, Totti, a twenty-year veteran, is featured in the two leading headlines of *La Gazzetta*'s homepage, in addition to a brief, and prominently displayed, video interview with the *romanista*. The headlines and captions for the link to the video are worth noting. Beyond the rather banal "Exclusive Interview with *La Gazzetta*," the headline includes the subheadline "Totti, 20 Years as a Legend" and the subsections "My goals," "Me and the

¹⁵⁹ Mario Cervi, "Torna Berlusconi ma difficilmente otterrà nuovi trionfi," 20.

¹⁶⁰ My primary text here is the online version of *La Gazzetta dello Sport* on March 28, 2013: http://www.gazzetta.it/index.shtml?refresh_ce;

World Cup,” and “Me and Sex.”¹⁶¹ In the interview itself Totti briefly discusses his first sexual encounter, but the appendage of the relevant headline was clearly a superficial hook to capture clicks. Perhaps more importantly, the interview itself opens with Totti recounting his own mythical start in professional soccer — playing in a youth game on a Saturday, scoring two goals, and then making his professional debut with *Roma* the very next day — which in the introduction to the text transcription of the interview is described as a “golden legend.”¹⁶² Totti proceeds to matter-of-factly discuss his own merits, noting that only Lionel Messi, the Argentinian star of FC Barcelona, is a better player than himself.

This main lead into Totti is followed by a brief piece by a two-time former coach of the player at *Roma*, Zdenek Zeman.¹⁶³ In his article, “Roma, Zeman: ‘Totti is Simply Soccer. A Symbol that is Becoming a Legend,’” the coach outlines Totti’s qualities: class, fun, altruism, sacrifice, love for his team. He goes on to note a key to Totti’s success that seems relevant to this dissertation’s consideration of political and fictional protagonists: humility. “It’s not easy to be king and stay humble” Zeman argues, pointing out that Totti’s love of the game, and fun approach to soccer, keep his feet on the ground and him firmly in the hearts of fans.

Balotelli was the focus of 4 segments of *La Gazzetta* on March 28, 2013. A prominent piece of the day’s news was dedicated to AC Milan general manager Adriano Galliani’s happiness with the team’s recent purchase of Balotelli, a striker, from English side Manchester City.¹⁶⁴ Galliani, *Il Cavaliere*’s right-hand man at the Berlusconi-owned club, describes Balotelli as having the body to be a world star, and compares the player’s goals to the great films of talented actors: “There are actors who need only one film to become global stars, Balotelli is like that, his goals are heavier than others’.” Balotelli was similarly featured in a brief video clip on *La Gazzetta*’s homepage, the link to which was pitched as “But That’s Balotelli (Nude)!” Balotelli briefly appears in only a towel walking through the press corps after Italy’s earlier friendly match with Brazil.¹⁶⁵ The clip is more hype than substance, but the emphasis on Balotelli’s body as a selling point is notable, as discussed in greater detail below.

Balotelli is also discussed in another brief clip, wherein the owner of Inter Milan, Balotelli’s former team and archrival of Berlusconi’s squad, notes that while his team would not be able to re-employ Balotelli, due to his previous controversial behavior with the club, he was happy that the player was becoming more professional.¹⁶⁶ The final focus of the day’s coverage

¹⁶¹ These are not perfect translations, but I have attempted to render the spirit of the original Italian phrasing, if not the perfect grammatical translation. The original titles are “lo e i gol,” “lo al mondiale,” and “lo e il sesso.”

¹⁶² <http://www.gazzetta.it/Calcio/Squadre/Roma/27-03-2013/roma-totti-io-er-mejo-che-c-solo-messi-superiore-lippi-tecnico-migliore-92700779907.shtml>

¹⁶³ <http://www.gazzetta.it/Calcio/Squadre/Roma/27-03-2013/roma-zeman-totti-semplimente-calcio-simbolo-che-diventa-leggenda-92701407486.shtml>. “Roma, Zeman: “Totti è semplicemente il calcio. Un simbolo che diventa leggenda”

¹⁶⁴ “Galliani si gode Balo e il Milan: ‘Lui una star, noi più forti.” <http://www.gazzetta.it/Calcio/Squadre/Milan/28-03-2013/milan-galliani-balotelli-star-mondiale-media-gol-stratosferica-noi-cresciamo-92707980803.shtml>. March 28, 2013

¹⁶⁵ “E Balotelli spunta (nudo) in zona mista.” <http://video.gazzetta.it/balotelli-spunta-nudo-zona-mista/60e8612c-9780-11e2-8d59-3782d9008f8f> March 28, 2013.

¹⁶⁶ “Moratti, complimenti a Balo (con rimpianto).” <http://video.gazzetta.it/moratti-complimenti-balo-con-rimpianto/43e60e54-977f-11e2-8d59-3782d9008f8f> March 28, 2013.

of Balotelli was an article dedicated to his skill in taking penalty kicks.¹⁶⁷ “SuperMario” is “cynical” and “cold-blooded” when taking such shots, and his “infallibility” puts him on a trajectory to reach the game’s alltime greats.

While numerous aspects of these articles could be drawn out and analyzed, here I would like to briefly comment on two that seem of greatest relevance for my wider discussion of politics and popular culture in contemporary Italy. These aspects are humility and sexuality. It is apparent, in both the Berlusconi tabloid materials and the Totti pieces of *La Gazzetta*, that there exists a tension in the portrayal of these protagonists between a type of humility, here seen as a recognition of the need to work hard and sacrifice oneself to obtain a necessary performance, and the unapologetic championing of one’s self. Berlusconi underlines his new disciplinary regimen, a physical ode to traditional hard work and sacrifice, but then is quick to point out that he has already lost a significant amount of weight — reflective of his “super” abilities. Totti does not shy away from proclaiming his own merits as one of, if not the, greatest player of his generation, but his former coach’s appraisal of the star does not discuss this type of self-aggrandizement, only his dedication to training.

This tension between humility and self-promotion does not tend to appear in the fictional programs I analyze in this dissertation. Protagonists, in Italian television, typically, though not always, seem to stick to the “humble hero” type. This type of role was also taken up by Romano Prodi in 2005-2006, but, as discussed here and earlier, not completely by Berlusconi. The latter’s feigned or partial humility thus seems to align him more with the stars of Italian popular culture, at least outside of televised fiction, than with traditional political leaders. While it is important to not draw overly broad conclusions from the few texts examined here, it would seem that Berlusconi embodies characteristics often associated with soccer players and other VIPs that appear in the tabloid press or other pop culture outlets. While perhaps these characteristics are somewhat more provocative, as also discussed below, than those that link Berlusconi to the heroes of Italian televised fiction, it should be remembered, as we have seen here and earlier in this dissertation, that Berlusconi maintains characteristic elements found in the heroes of televised fiction, including an anti-elite posturing and an outsider persona, as well as a relatively more conservative emphasis on the family, at least prior to his 2008 election.

A partial explanation of this more conservative protagonism in televised fiction would seem to be the legacy of the RAI’s earlier pedagogical efforts, the *sceneggiati* discussed in Chapter 1 of this dissertation. The professional culture and public expectations attached to this format and its successors are different than other areas of Italian television and wider Italian popular culture, where sex is quite prevalent. The articles from *La Gazzetta* mentioned above, as well as the typical fare of the tabloid press, are certainly indicative of this widely acknowledged aspect of contemporary Italian society. Promoting an interview with Totti by misleadingly marketing it as a sexual confession certainly exemplifies this sexual emphasis, as does the pushing of a very brief and non-consequential clip of Balotelli nude by *La Gazzetta*. That these sexual narratives and bodies are male might initially surprise an observer, but when considering the case of Berlusconi they should not. For a traditional political figure, his sex stories, quips, and scandals, as well as his emphasis on his body, might seem somewhat unusual — for their public nature, not so much for their content — but when considering the panorama of the

¹⁶⁷ Bocci, Alessandra. “Balotelli infallibile dal dischetto: per lui 15 rigori sui 15.”

<http://www.gazzetta.it/Calcio/Squadre/Milan/28-03-2013/undici-metri-dibalogloria-mario-rigori-dentro-segreti-un-infallibilita-92702757563.shtml>

protagonists of Italian popular culture, at least in the tabloid and soccer press, as well as much of the Italian popular cinema (*cinepanettone*), they are quite mundane.

These same media outlets also differ from the televised fictional programs of my sample in their emphasis on VIPs. While the stars of televised dramas in Italy are, or become, stars themselves, the characters they interpret tend to be portrayed as “everyday” Italians. Even when the programs of my sample are dedicated to important historical figures, such as Padre Pio, these protagonists are played as humble, down-to-earth figures, unaware or unimpressed by their historical importance. The tabloid and sporting press appear to be somewhat different in this regard. While the VIPS or elite athletes may be featured in a “reality” mode that is reminiscent of the everyday, the actual context of these displays (exclusive, exotic beaches, highest-level sporting venues, luxury resorts) is anything but typical for most Italians.

Humility in this wider consideration of Italian popular culture is somewhat more ambiguous. Less is made of star athletes or actors’ work ethic and down-to-earth personas (if present), while particular energy is dedicated to lauding either the stars’ results (often, though not only, in the case of athletes) or a completely unrelated sphere of activity (like their sex lives). In the material examined here, the Zeman article on Totti is somewhat of an exception, though note that the star himself is anything but humble.

While Berlusconi’s professed humility (as discussed at greater length in Chapter 2) is in-line with the important television shows I study, as well as the traditional model of the Italian politician, his unabashed promotion of his own merits places him firmly within the realm of the protagonists of the tabloid and sporting press, and presumably larger Italian popular culture as well. Berlusconi’s drive to appear sober and chaste in the *Chi* spread also underlines his efforts to at least pay lip service to a sexual and familial culture that is not raunchy, a positioning similar to the traditional expectations of a political leader in Italy, as well as the televised fictional programs I discuss here. At the same time, however, Berlusconi’s sexual-themed jokes and the often crude sexuality of the content of his commercial programming and publishing are representative of the wider sexual trends in Italian popular culture. Below I discuss these issues in relation to Gramsci’s earlier theorizations of the relation between sexuality, economy, and culture.

Politics, Popular Culture, Gramsci: “The Sexual Question”

Here I focus on Gramsci’s thoughts on sexuality as discussed most explicitly in his notes on Americanism and Fordism.¹⁶⁸ This “sexual” angle seems to be a useful tool for considering politics, popular culture, and Berlusconi, given the rather intense sexuality of much Italian popular culture, as discussed above, as well as Berlusconi’s sexual notoriety. Recent examinations of Gramsci’s treatment of sexuality have found several problematic aspects of his thought, notably his heteronormative assumptions and potential hostility to homosexuals. His critics have also, however, noted the importance of Gramsci’s notes on “the sexual question” to the inclusion of sex and gender into analyses of economic production.¹⁶⁹ In other words, Gramsci

¹⁶⁸ These notes appear in Notebook 22 of the *Prison Notebooks*.

¹⁶⁹ A recent example of this perspective is Michael Ekers ‘Gramsci and the Erotics of Labor: More Notes on “The Sexual Question,”’ in *Gramsci: Space, Nature, Politics*. Eds. Ekers, Gillian Hart, Stefan Kipfer and Alex Loftus (Somerset: Wiley, 2012). Ekers’ critique of Gramsci among the aforementioned lines appears to be valid, though his description of Gramsci as being hostile to homosexuality might be overstated. The “sodomy” that Eker in part bases his argument on (Gramsci’s affirmation that “bestiality and sodomy,” described as “monstrous sexual

does not isolate sex and gender from other considerations of political economy, but rather recognizes these facets of life as directly tied to economic productivity, in particular as shaped by the demands of Fordism and Taylorism.

While modern, or postmodern economies now operate in some fundamentally different ways than in Gramsci's time, "the sexual question," particularly in Italy, appears to be just as, if not more, relevant to considerations of the economic sphere than during the 1920s and 1930s. Beyond the limited and unequal participation of women in the Italian labor force, women appear to have become more intensely commodified as both products and consumers in the media-saturated and more service-oriented (at least with respect to the past) Italian economy. This media infrastructure and domestically "outsourced" economy (by which I mean the reliance on third parties for familial and social maintenance and production functions once taken care of by the family — cooking, cleaning, hair dressing, wedding planning, etc.) relies heavily on advertising and publicity for its functionality. From the early 1980s forward, though to a lesser degree also earlier, a primary component of such discourse has been the attractive and apparently sexually indulgent woman: seemingly available, happy in her flagrant sexuality (skimpy clothing, verbal innuendo, etc.). This stereotype has served as both a promised utopia for heterosexual male consumers and a social expectation for females, who, explicitly or not, are called to model the form and behavior of such advertising or publicity.

It would seem, then, that sex has now come to play an integral part in consumption, rather than production. Unlike Gramsci's framing of early 20th century management, today's corporate leaders, supervisors, and economic experts do not worry about the productivity risks of adultery, philandering, or other sexual practices, but instead recognize the importance of having a "sexy" brand and/or the publicity benefits that can accrue to a subject of sexual scandal.¹⁷⁰ These same thought leaders do worry about low birth rates in advanced countries, an aspect of the sexual question addressed by Gramsci, but this concern is fueled by a fear of shrinking markets and fewer contributors to old-age benefit plans, not the need to create a productive workforce (which can easily be imported, legally or illegally).

In Bourdieu's terms of distinction, this sexualization of consumption appears to denote as normal, or typical, emotional or psychological practices—the open display of, and public excitement by, or other interest in, sexual themes—that previously were peripheral and/or suppressed aspects of Italian public life. Since taste "classifies the classifier," the acceptance of this sexualized commercial culture as normal indicates the bringing to the mainstream of what in Gramsci's time, as seen also in his writings, would have been considered inappropriate and vulgar. This is not necessarily a "popularization of taste" in terms of content in a strict sense (i.e. sex = vulgar = popular), but in form. The sexual mode and styles used to promote consumption today are fairly simple and obvious, and do not make oblique reference to external images or themes. This change in the dominant Italian taste has been partially caused by, and coincided with, until at least the late 2000s, the relative expansion and then stabilization of an Italian

crimes," "are widespread" in the countryside) is "*pederastia*" in Gerratana's definitive, Italian version of the *Prison Notebooks* (Q22,3; SPN 295). Ekers is relying on Hoare and Nowell-Smith's *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, translated by Hoare. It is quite possible that historical, contextual factors may have justified the translation from pederasty to sodomy; if this were an oversight, however, it is important to note that pederasty and sodomy are not the same, and that this piece of evidence, at least, does not necessarily imply hostility towards homosexuality on Gramsci's part.

¹⁷⁰ Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere: edizione critica dell'Istituto Gramsci*. Ed. Valentino Gerratana (Turin: Einaudi, 1977), 2147-2150; 2160-2164.

middle-class, and to a lesser degree working class, and the concomitant marginalization of intellectual activity in Italian public life. In this scenario, staying with Bourdieu's scheme, intellectual goods may still be signs of distinction, but they are also signs of derision for/by the mainstream, as they represent the aloofness and arrogance that these non-explicitly intellectual individuals associate with the emphasis on form found in "high culture." Conversely, as noted above, the goods of this sexualized consumer culture have come to be seen as normal, everyday, "popular" in a positive sense.¹⁷¹

In the Italian case, Berlusconi's role in these developments is well-known. Through his media empire, in particular his television and advertising assets, he has been able to influence the iconic images that circulate through the Italian economy. While much of Berlusconi's political rhetoric from 1994 through the 2006 election appears to have been somewhat separated from the sexualized imagery of his commercial enterprises, as seen in the relatively bland, in sexual terms, nature of his 2001 and 2006 campaigns, this would be increasingly less the case after Berlusconi's election in 2008, which I discuss at greater length in the fourth, concluding chapter of this dissertation. It was after his election that year that Berlusconi's sexual remarks became more open and more frequent, that any attempts to hide or deny his sexual activity became futile, and that, most importantly, the stereotypical, sexualized woman of Italian television and advertising became a political symbol and, in several cases, a practicing politician.

The 2005-2006 campaign therefore appears to be the last significant political moment in Berlusconi's "middle period" (from 2001 to 2011, when he was Italian prime minister for 8 years and the dominant opposition figure when not in office) where a potent element of Italian popular culture, a generalized female sexuality and its stereotypical visual symbol — the attractive and sexualized woman — was kept out of Berlusconi's political rhetoric. The increasing presence of this symbol as part of Berlusconi's political persona may have been a primary factor in his decreasing popularity following his 2008 election. While it was ultimately Italy's poor economic performance and the potential international repercussions thereof, that forced Berlusconi from office, it is quite possible that this decline in his fortunes was facilitated by the sexual tarnishing of the traditional, familial, utopia he promised his supporters.

This may be because the utopias that Berlusconi has consistently promised have been based on a rather traditional economically liberal business ethic (hard work which leads to savings which leads to investment which leads to prosperity) rather than "branding" and related postmodern economic strategies (increasing reliance on sophisticated and until 2011 relaxed methods of financing and consumption as the drivers of economic activity), as well as a fairly conventional view of personal lives — dedicated to the heterosexual nuclear, or vertically extended family. In such a configuration, where statistics, as discussed earlier in this chapter and in Chapter 2, provide the "proof" of success — economic and otherwise, and children born of heterosexual wedlock serve as the nexus of individual and familial ambitions and sacrifice, there is little room for the *velina* or similar feminine figures from Italian gameshows or the tabloid press. The appeal, to certain elements of the electorate at least, of such rhetorically traditional utopias, as well as the continued success of rather staid programs such as those examined here, suggest that many Italians may seek refuge in such programming from some of the primary characteristics of contemporary Italy, notably economic uncertainty and a sexualized visual culture.

¹⁷¹ Pierre Bourdieu. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 1-7; 230-256; 466-484.

In other words, a type of sexual utopia promoted by Berlusconi, that associated with his television networks and advertising apparatus, may have served as the impetus for the success of the fictional programs examined here. Perhaps, in addition to the structural factors discussed in Chapter 1, Italian televised fiction was reborn in the 1990s as a response to the increased sexuality of Italian airwaves in the 1980s. In politics, Berlusconi did well to attach his persona to a rather conservative utopia while distancing himself from the sexual propaganda of his commercial interests. It seems that, in Italy, at least, the type of sexual utopia promised by much television programming and advertising — built around attractive and available women malleable to male desires — is not yet ready to be subsumed into the political rhetoric of prominent leaders.

In this chapter I have shown that there was less overlap in the characteristics and problems of politics and popular culture in my 2005-2006 sample texts. Despite this partial drift between the spheres, however, certain characteristics of the protagonists and the nature of the problems of both spheres did coincide. Protagonists in both spheres continued to be presented as approachable, humble, and outside the established circuits of power, even in the case of Berlusconi. Often these protagonists worked against problems of economic elitism and political and social unity, issues that in both politics and popular culture were at times coalesced into the figure of the wealthy tycoon. Here too, Berlusconi paralleled his political and fictional counterparts, railing against the figure that most observers would associate with his own political and economic behavior.

In comparing these elements of political rhetoric and fictional television programming to key characteristics of the Italian tabloid and sporting press, I have argued that humility plays an ambiguous role in these latter fields. VIPs and star soccer players pay lip service to the ideals of groundedness, hard work, and sacrifice, but many of their declarations and activities as presented by these publications belie such a belief in humility. These protagonists are also not presented as outsiders of any type, except perhaps in their physical or financial exceptionalism; wealthy tycoons are not problematic in either type of publication. Notably, the Italian tabloid and sporting press place a heavy emphasis on a frank and often crude sexuality that is absent in my political and televised fiction examples. Berlusconi's positioning in survey of Italian popular culture is complex; he pays homage to the more conservative and humble ideals of Italian televised fiction, but his self-aggrandizement and burnishing of his exceptional credentials echoes the stars of tabloid and soccer culture in Italy; his later "sexualization" of politics after his 2008 election also clearly echoes the tabloid and soccer publications prevalent in Italy, though this sexual bent was not yet the case in 2006.

Gramsci's considerations of sexuality in relation to economic production are still useful for a consideration of sexuality in contemporary Italy, particularly Berlusconi's place in such a context. Whereas before Gramscian reflections on sexuality emphasized its relation to production, sexuality has now become an integral part of consumption. The key driver of this "sexual" consumption is commercial advertising, perhaps the most fundamental mode of Berlusconi's political and economic behavior. Interestingly, while Berlusconi's importation of advertising techniques into Italian politics has proven very successful, the sexual content of much of commercial advertising does not appear to appeal to the Italian public in the political context. This suggests a certain affinity between politics and the televised fictional programs discussed here, which also appear to be most successful when they are not blatantly sexualized. In both cases, it appears that Italians seek a type of respite from the sexualism that is pervasive in Italian commercial culture. Berlusconi, then, was right to cordon-off his political

communication, and persona, from this sexualized commercial culture in 2006 and earlier; the increasing malleability of this “sexual” boundary between politics and popular culture after his 2008 election likely heightened Italian dissatisfaction with him, and demonstrates that while increasingly blurred in most aspects, in regard to sexuality the lines between politics and some aspects of popular culture remain intact.

Chapter 4

Introduction

In this chapter I examine texts from the 2008 Italian general election and 2007-2008 television season, again focusing on the respective spheres' representation of protagonists and problems. I then contextualize these findings with respect to Gramsci's thoughts on education. I argue that in 2007-2008 Berlusconi nominally took a step-back from the one-man show of previous elections, though upon further inspection this leaving of the limelight served to underscore his centrality, and mythic status, to and among the Italian center-right. Such a positioning was different from the season's television protagonists, which were again cast, in most cases, as everyday, reluctant, heroes, far from the mythologized Berlusconi. Berlusconi and the Pdl were, however, in-sync with the fictional programs of 2007-2008 with their focus on the past—for both nostalgic inspiration and as the source of current problems. In considering Berlusconi's self-promotion, in this and previous elections, under the aegis of Gramsci's thoughts on education, I note that Berlusconi is at once non-Gramscian and "Gramscian." His superficial use of statistics and facile reasoning, and his leveraging of common sense to promote specious arguments, are clearly antithetical to Gramsci's thoughts on critical reflection and genuine learning. Yet starting from voters' common sense, and speaking to them in frames of reference (religion, soccer, etc.) already familiar to them, of matters that are clearly and directly relevant to them, is, I argue, Gramscian, in its method, though clearly not in its content or motivation. In some ways Berlusconi's "educative" rhetoric is similar to the moral messaging of the fictional programs I consider, which often, though not always, offer a familiar and simple referential framework, covered with an emotive appeal that is typical of Berlusconi's discourse.

This reflection is followed by an admittedly cursory comparison of Berlusconi's role in Italian politics and popular culture to the relationship between these spheres in the United States from approximately the 1980s forward. I find that Berlusconi's positioning between politics and popular culture appears to most closely resemble Ronald Reagan's in the 1980s, where the spheres seem to have been more closely aligned, at least in content, than the current configuration under Obama, though, as I note, in none of these cases, including that of Berlusconi, should any "syncing" between politics and pop culture be seen as complete; rather, as I discuss below, over time there appear to be greater or less intense similarities between these fields, with Berlusconi being notable, among other reasons, for the longevity and degree of his straddling of pop culture and politics, not such straddling *per se*.

I conclude this chapter, and this dissertation, with an attempt to put the various strands of analysis assembled thus far into a coherent whole, using Gramsci's notions of hegemony and the national-popular as my key concepts. In my conclusion, I argue that Berlusconi has helped to create and subsequently leveraged a type of conservative national-popular culture of which, in many aspects, he is the educative symbol, or role model. Such a finding is not surprising, but in my final consideration of Berlusconi I underline how this situation is simultaneously powerful and imperfect; while exemplary, Berlusconi is also often at odds with key aspects of contemporary Italian popular culture. I note that this divergence may increase as Italy slowly moves away from a television-dominated society to an Internet-based one, a shift that will likely place increasing emphasis on the "celebrity politics" that Berlusconi has mastered. Interestingly, while the Berlusconi "type" of politician will remain in Italy, and becoming increasingly important in the near future, such figures will work in a political and cultural context that is increasingly fragmented, within and between these spheres.

Texts

In this election season Berlusconi differed somewhat from his past electoral incarnations, taking a step-back from the one-man shows that were integral to his previous electoral efforts. Despite this apparent lessening of Berlusconi's electoral presence, a close analysis of his campaign materials shows that his nominal absence underlined his status as a type of hagiographic figure. In these same materials Berlusconi and his allies present a youth-oriented and "populist" approach to Italy's problems that is tinted by notions of group-protagonism, as discussed in Chapter 2 of this dissertation. Closer scrutiny, however, reveals that underneath this popular sheen the protagonists were older Italians with means, in-line with Berlusconi's own status in previous elections. The fictional protagonists of my 2007-2008 sample mostly deviated from such a presentation. These protagonists were mostly cast as humble and middle- or lower-class; their ages varied from the very young to the middle-aged. Walter Veltroni and the PD, Berlusconi's opponents in the 2008 election, were cast somewhere between Berlusconi and my fictional protagonists. Veltroni, as his party's leader, was elevated to a symbolic figure, but was not the recipient of hagiographic adoration. The PD also sought to portray itself as of and for the common Italian, though in some ways its overly intellectualistic bent belied this idea.

The problems discussed by my political and fictional protagonists differed. The political figures were primarily preoccupied with the economy while this issue was not present in my fictional samples. Interestingly, both my fictional and political protagonists looked to the past to identify the sources of current problems and the inspiration for their solution. This backward looking focus was more pronounced among Berlusconi and his allies and my fictional heroes, while Veltroni and the PD were somewhat more open to non-traditional, forward-looking solutions.

The 2008 elections in Italy saw a convincing Berlusconi victory. Against Walter Veltroni and his newly formed *Partito democratico*'s ("Democratic Party," or Pd) "clean" campaign — no naming of Berlusconi, no going negative, little mention of Berlusconi's judicial problems or conflicts-of-interest — Berlusconi coasted to an electoral win that gave him ample majorities in both the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate.¹⁷² The "foregone conclusion" nature of the race (caused largely by the center-left's low popularity after attempting to enact necessary, but painful, reform measures after its 2006 victory), in addition to Veltroni's admirable, but less soundbyte-amenable strategy, led to a less sensational campaign than those of 2001 and 2006, and permitted Berlusconi to mostly renounce the calculated media events of previous elections. The primary issue of the campaign was economic, given Italy's recent economic decline and contemporary unfolding of the U.S. subprime mortgage crisis.¹⁷³ Berlusconi and the nascent *Popolo della libertà*'s proposed responses to Italy's ills were infused with nostalgia for an earlier, and more prosperous Italian economy, as discussed in greater detail below.¹⁷⁴ While not nostalgic, the Pd's emphasis on creating a modern Italy was, ironically, the umpteenth recycling

¹⁷² Berlusconi's coalition of his own *Popolo della libertà* ("People of Freedom", or Pdl) and the Northern League captured approximately 17.3 million votes, versus the approximately 14.1 million of the center-left coalition of the Pd and *Italia dei valori* ("Italy of Values," or Idv). This margin gave Berlusconi and his allies a 58 seat majority in the Chamber of Deputies and a 33 seat cushion in the Senate. James L. Newell, "Introduction: a Guide to the Election and 'Instructions for Use' ." *The Italian General Election of 2008: Berlusconi Strikes Back*. Ed. James Newell (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 1-24.

¹⁷³ Donatella Campus. "Campaign Issues and Themes" in Newell, 2009, 137-149.

¹⁷⁴ The *Popolo della libertà* was the official fusing of Berlusconi's *Forza Italia* and Gianfranco Fini's *Alleanza Nazionale*, among other parties.

of a theme that has been a political and cultural preoccupation of Italy since the state's founding in 1861.

The 2007-2008 Italian television season similarly tended to look backwards. Nearly a third of the season's programs were set in the past; close to one-half of all programs were continuations of existing series.¹⁷⁵ Even Mediaset's successful attempt to create a modern series, *I Cesaroni*, appears to have been firmly rooted in the generic masculinity and comedic character of the traditional *commedia all'italiana*, symbolized by Claudio Amendola's role as a stern "padre all'antica" ("old-fashioned father").¹⁷⁶ Some of the most significant programs of the season, which I discuss in greater detail below, also looked back to the past for content and/or form. This season's episodes of *Maresciallo Rocca* are built around flashbacks to his youth, while *La vita rubata*, a historical melodramatization of a tragic, mafia-related abduction and murder, similarly cuts back-and-forth between various memories of the past to weave its narrative. Another key program, the historical-biographical *Il capo dei capi*, follows the rise and fall of Totò Riina, the boss of Italian mob bosses, from his childhood in World War II era Sicily to his capture in the early 1990s. *Rebecca, la prima moglie*, an adaptation of the du Maurier novel, is set in interwar Britain and was the most successful program of the season.

Here are the details of the primary materials that I analyze in this chapter:

Television¹⁷⁷

<u>Title:</u>	<u>Channel:</u> ¹⁷⁸	<u>Aired:</u>	<u>Audience:</u> ¹⁷⁹	<u>Share (%)</u> : ¹⁸⁰	<u>Summary:</u>
<i>Il maresciallo Rocca: L'amico di infanzia</i>	Rai Uno	March 3, 4, 2008	6,916,936	25.4	Rocca's past comes back to life with tragic consequences for all involved.
<i>Rebecca la prima moglie</i>	Rai Uno	April 7, 8, 2008	7,697,034	29.2	A new wife deals with the burden of the legacy and death of her husband's first wife.
<i>La vita rubata</i>	Rai Uno	March 10,	7,604,257	28.5	A melodrama unravels

¹⁷⁵ Fabrizio Lucherini, "Una fase di consolidamento. Analisi della stagione 2007-2008." *Se vent'anni sembran pochi: La fiction italiana, l'Italia nella fiction. Anni ventesimo e ventunesimo*. Ed. Milly Buonanno (Rome: Rai Eri, 2010), 3-44. 22 of the season's 67 programs were set in the past (19); 31 were continuations of existing series (12).

¹⁷⁶ Lucherini, Fabrizio. "I Cesaroni. Un fenomeno di popolarità sospeso tra passato e futuro" in Buonanno 2010, 61-84. *I Cesaroni* is modern in its format—a long serial of approximately 25 episodes a season—and its intentional "collateral" development (my term), by which I mean its use as a platform for the subsequent selling of merchandise, online activities, etc. it is also modern in its content, which includes untraditional families (here those of two divorcees that wed) and more frank sexual allusions, among other items.

¹⁷⁷ This information comes from the respective programs' "profiles" in Buonanno, 2010, 116 (Rocca), 118 (Rebecca), 95 (La vita), 149 (Cesaroni), 106 (Il capo).

¹⁷⁸ During the time period in question, the primary national television channels in Italy were the public *RAI Uno*, *RAI Due*, and *RAI Tre*, and Berlusconi's Mediaset channels: *Canale 5*, *Rete 4*, and *Italia Uno*. The flagship channels, generally reserved for the most anticipated mainstream productions were, and are, *Rai Uno* and *Canale 5*, respectively.

¹⁷⁹ "Audience" refers to the average number of viewers for a given program in the season.

¹⁸⁰ "Share" refers to the percentage of all Italian television viewers that were watching a given program during its airing.

		2008			the mystery and corrupt investigation of a 1980s mafia killing.
<i>I Cesaroni</i>	Canale 5	Weekly, Feb.-May 2008	6,536,134	26.78	A contemporary twist on the Brady Bunch.
<i>Il capo dei capi</i>	Canale 5	Thursdays, Oct. 25-Nov. 29, 2007	7,278,844	28.32	An exploration of the life of the most powerful mob boss, Totò Riina.

Politics:

Item:	Summary:
The People of Freedom's (<i>Il Popolo della libertà</i> , or <i>Pdl</i> , Berlusconi's center-right coalition) political platform	A relatively brief proposal for a Berlusconi government, built around "7 Missions" mostly dedicated to the Italian economy.
" <i>Meno male che Silvio c'è</i> " ("Thanks Goodness for Silvio.")	An informal pop anthem/video/web sensation dedicated to the wonder and power of Berlusconi.
The political program of the <i>Partito democratico</i> , or PD	An extremely detailed blueprint for a future center-left government.
"I am PD"	An unofficial rallying cry/video/web hit set to the music of the Village People's "YMCA."

Protagonists

Politics

The 2008 campaign saw two political protagonists portray themselves very differently, though the Italy they described was often the same. Walter Veltroni positioned himself as the candidate of change, intent on, and capable of, bringing not only new ideas to, but also new ways of conducting, politics. To this end, the PD ran alone, challenging the Pdl and its electoral ally, the Northern League, without the smaller leftist and centrist parties with which it had formed alliances in previous elections. Veltroni also opted, as noted above, to mostly avoid negative campaigning. Beyond this "fresh" approach, Veltroni also framed his candidacy as one of optimism and hope, borrowing heavily from Barack Obama's 2008 U.S. campaign. Most notably, Veltroni adopted the slogan, "si può fare," reminiscent of the American candidate's "yes we can." Berlusconi, comfortably ahead throughout the brief election season, reverted to a more statesman-like posturing, similar to his 2001 campaign, avoiding the vulgar populism that had characterized much of his 2006 effort. He even went so far as to explicitly not promise any miracles to the Italian people, attempting to signal the sober mindset that he would bring to the country's problems.¹⁸¹

Berlusconi was again the central protagonist of the center-right's electoral efforts in 2008, though in a notably less present manner than in his 2001 and 2006 campaigns. Whereas the

¹⁸¹ The introduction to the seventh "mission" of the Pdl's platform states bluntly: "We do not perform and we do not promise miracles." (*Non facciamo e non promettiamo miracoli.*)

2001 Contract with Italians had been a personal agreement between Berlusconi and the Italian electorate, and notable 2006 proposals (mostly the series of tax-cutting measures discussed in Chapter 3) largely emanated from Berlusconi personally, and not his wider coalition, the principal components of the center-right's 2008 proposals were visibly backed by the coalition's members. This is clearly evident in the political program drafted by Berlusconi's new party, the *Popolo della libertà*.¹⁸² The document, "*Il programma del Pdl: sette missioni per il futuro dell'Italia*" ("The Pdl's Platform: Seven Missions for Italy's Future"), was presented in Rome not only by Berlusconi, but also by his then heir-apparent and former leader of *Alleanza Nazionale*, Gianfranco Fini, along with other political allies. Berlusconi himself is not named directly in the document, but his name does appear when the platform references the center-right's 2001-2006 turn in government, ("*il Governo Berlusconi*"). Aside from this reference, the only use of specific names in the program occurs when discussing the Bossi-Fini immigration law, the economic proposals of the late academic and government consultant Marco Biagi, and when discrediting the outgoing "*Governo Prodi*."¹⁸³ The rest of the Pdl platform includes few identifying subjects, subject pronouns, possessive adjectives, or verbs. Those that remain are almost entirely in the first-person plural, the "we" that is typical of political movements, but which has often been absent from Berlusconi's political rhetoric. The "we" that emerges from the platform is never explicitly defined, being, as it was, obvious for its authors and contemporary observers. An analysis of the Pdl's 2008 program, however, exposes the demographic and political contours of the party: old, nostalgic, anxious about its place in the world. At the same time, the Pdl emerges, unsurprisingly, as practical in economic and cultural terms.

Among those destined to benefit from the Pdl's proposed solutions, the young stand out for the particular attention given to their plight. A specific pillar of the Pdl's "second mission," to support the family, is to "give the young a future," "putting them in the condition to build their future." On the surface a minor grammatical detail, the "their" of this last phrase is indicative of the "other" status of Italian youth with respect to Berlusconi's party in 2008. In fact, "their" only appears this one time in the document, underlining the paternalistic stance of Berlusconi and his allies in regard to youth, both women and men. The proposed assistance to young Italians is fully subsumed to wider rhetorical pillars of Berlusconi's political vision, namely the traditional family and "do-it-yourself capitalism."¹⁸⁴ In its mission to save Italy the Pdl proposes a fiscal bonus for expecting parents (to promote greater natality), a bonus for renters ("to help young couples and the less fortunate afford the burden of rent"), public guarantees for "honor loans" ("prestiti d'onore"—loans with subsidized interest rates and forgiven capital) and other "start-up financing for youth that start their own business, as well as the utilization of "cooperative insurance" programs that "guarantee youth social and healthcare assistance in the case of

¹⁸² In 2009 this federation would become a single political party of the same name.

¹⁸³ The Bossi-Fini law, named after its co-sponsors Umberto Bossi (then leader of the Northern League, and Gianfranco Fini, then leader of National Alliance), was a controversial 2001 reform of Italian immigration policy. Marco Biagi was a labor law consultant for Berlusconi's previous government; he was assassinated by the Red Brigades terrorist group on March 19, 2002.

¹⁸⁴ My own imperfect term to describe Berlusconi's preferred form of economic liberalism, where economic success results mostly from individual initiative and the absence of government interference. While in-line with most liberal economic ideology, in the Berlusconi case the individual initiative element takes on greater resonance given his own personal mythology as a "self-made man."

unemployment and need.”¹⁸⁵ The center-right also proposed an experimental no-tax period for young entrepreneurs and professionals.

The Pdl’s liberalism and youth-oriented policies resulted in some tension in its goals for labor reform, where the coalition set itself the “objective of full occupation in order to transform flexibility in the entrance to the workforce into an opportunity of stability and professional growth, eliminating at its root the phenomenon of precarious employment.” Since Italy’s youth unemployment rate was, and is, particularly high, despite existing flexible labor policies, this phrase was an awkward attempt by Berlusconi and his allies to justify labor flexibility that had yet to bear fruit. To encourage employers to hire youth, the Pdl also proposed a tax credit for businesses that either hired young Italians or exchanged short-term employment contracts (“*tempo determinato*”) for open-ended ones (“*tempo indeterminato*,” or traditional, hard-to-fire employment).

The protagonists of the Pdl’s proposals are similarly identified in the coalition’s language regarding the family and later its approach to immigration and culture. In discussing the family, the Pdl platform notes: “The family is at the center of our platform; for us the family is the natural community founded on marriage between man and woman.”¹⁸⁶ A similar conservatism is present in the Pdl’s cultural and immigration-related proposals. Berlusconi and his allies promote small research and cultural centers (“*cittadelle della cultura e della ricerca*”) to “study Italian masterpieces and develop plans and strategies to promote and protect traditional productions.” Along similar lines, the Pdl also proposes to defend “our linguistic heritage, traditions, and cultures also to favor the integration of foreigners.” As for foreigners themselves, the Pdl’s proposals reflected the electoral influence of the *Lega Nord*, with language that clearly saw some, if not most, immigrants as problematic. Thus new detention centers (“centri di permanenza temporanea”) were needed to identify and expel illegal immigrants (“clandestini”), while the illegal settlements of “nomads” also needed to be confronted. In these cases, it was not so much the Pdl’s aim to curb and better regulate immigration that revealed who it was, but its tone. The language cited here nods to those Italians who see immigration in stark us vs. them, black and white, terms. Immigration is seen as a new threat that can be effectively turned back, allowing Italy to return to a previous time where it did not exist, or at least was not a problem. This approach completely ignores the possibilities, or realities, of a new multicultural, multiracial Italy.¹⁸⁷ This same stance is apparent in the coalition’s outlook on the family and the “Made in Italy” label.

¹⁸⁵ “Il programma del Pdl: sette missioni per il futuro dell’Italia,” p. 3. These calls for cooperative insurance and social safety nets for unemployed youth are examples of Berlusconi’s “social” capitalism—rhetorically a core liberal ideology softened by fairly generous welfare benefits for the economically disadvantaged. In practice, Berlusconi’s governments have often not lived up to their liberal ideology.

¹⁸⁶ “La famiglia è al centro del nostro programma; per noi la famiglia è la comunità naturale fondata sul matrimonio tra uomo e donna...”

¹⁸⁷ Such behavior echoes similar reactions to immigration in disparate parts of the West or “North,” perhaps as seen most visibly in the case of the United States, France, and the United Kingdom. Such reactions to migrants reflect an essentialization of both “arriving” and “receiving” cultures, essentializations that further see such cultural groupings as static and closed, sealed containers of traditions, values, etc. In the context of recent scholarship on the potential cultural “mixing” involved in both migration and colonialism, attitudes like those of the *Pdl* towards immigrants or foreigners suggest a strong aversion to, and refutation of the possibility of hybrid cultures. These anxieties towards migration are particularly interesting in the Italian case given the peninsula’s particular history of fragmentation, internal division and migration, colonialism, and relatively late exposure to

The Pdl's platform's proposes "Made in Italy" as a potential cure to the country's economic woes. As part of one of the six pillars of the Pdl's first self-imposed "mission," to "relaunch growth," Berlusconi and his allies proposed lobbying the European Union to defend "our production" against "asymmetrical" Asian competition.¹⁸⁸ The use of "our" here is indicative of the Pdl's composition and policies: young Italians and foreigners are seen as outsiders, while the insiders are the Italians with means, the employers, and other significant economic stakeholders. Rather than seek to synthesize new developments into the new social and economic contexts of Italy in 2008, the group sought to turn back the clock to a previous era where these issues were imagined not to have been problematic.

The final mission of the Pdl's 2008 platform, "An Extraordinary Plan for Public Finance," presents, in what in hindsight is great irony, Berlusconi and his allies as pragmatic heroes capable of solving the country's apparently intractable problems of public debt and deficits. This "extraordinary" "mission" was to be accomplished through a "great" pact between the Italian state, various levels of local government, and private savers and investors. The Pdl's proposal was built mostly on the privatization of public assets so as to "not put their hands in Italians' pockets" ("non metteremo le mani nelle tasche dei cittadini"), i.e. so as to not raise taxes. But, of course, Berlusconi and his allies were quick to note that they did not perform, and did not promise, miracles ("Non facciamo e non promettiamo miracoli,") especially since their proposed solutions were subject to the limitations of three external factors: the financial crisis that had begun in 2007 (and which would explode in 2008 and the consequences of which would force Berlusconi from power in 2011), Italy's European Union obligations, and the instability of Italian public finances themselves. Despite these potential restraints, the Pdl assured Italians that it could rein in public spending and reduce Italian debt without cutting social spending, primarily through the aforementioned privatizations, efficiency gains (i.e. a streamlining of government offices and operations), and improved tax collection policies.

In the Pdl's platform, then, political protagonists are pragmatic and nostalgic, paternalistic, traditional in their conception of the family, and somewhat hostile to a multiracial

Italy. They are employers and are old. The hagiographic exultation of Berlusconi as Superman is largely absent from the Pdl political program; instead, the emphasis is on the center-right as a group, defined by the characteristics noted above. This framing of Berlusconi's

immigration from non-European locales. Interestingly, while immigration itself, and the problems associated with it, can sometimes be represented via a synecdoche, for example a Muslim head scarf, the idea of immigration itself, or the figure of the immigrant, can also be seen as synecdoches for wider problems or anxieties with dealing with the contemporary political-cultural conditions of a given "receiving" culture, Italy included. For information on essentializing and the synecdoche in connection to immigration, see Steven Vertovec, "The Cultural Politics of Nation and Migration*." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 40 (2011): 241-256; Information on essentialization in the Italian case is also to be found in Ralph Grillo's "Immigration and the Politics of Recognizing Difference in Italy," *The Politics of Recognizing Difference: Multiculturalism Italian-Style*. Eds. Ralph Grillo and Jeff Pratt (Burlington: Ashgate, 2002), 1-24; My information on hybridity in the Italian case comes from Jacqueline Andall's and Derek Duncan's, "Introduction: Hybridity in Italian Colonial and Postcolonial Culture" in *National Belongings: Hybridity in Italian Colonial and Postcolonial Cultures* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), 1-20.

¹⁸⁸ The other pillars were: "A New Tax Regime for Businesses" ("*Un nuovo fisco per le imprese*"); "Infrastructure, new sources of energy and telecommunications" ("*Infrastutture, nuove fonti di energia e telecomunicazioni*"); "Labor" ("*Lavoro*"); "Deregulations" ("*Liberalizzazioni*") and; "Reorganization and Digitalization of the Public Administration" ("*Riorganizzazione e digitalizzazione della P.A.*").

political protagonism in 2008, however, is complicated by another important political text, the now infamous song and video *Meno male che Silvio c'è*.¹⁸⁹ (“Thanks Goodness for Silvio”)

If Berlusconi was mostly absent, in a literal sense, from the wording of the Pdl’s 2008 program, he was extremely present, though invisible, in this well-remembered piece of 2008 political propaganda. The video for *Meno male*, which has been amply distributed, parodied, and ridiculed around the web, features mostly generic images of “typical” Italians in “typical” contexts singing the praises of Berlusconi as the song’s lyrics appear as subtitles, encouraging sing-alongs to the anthem’s catchy refrain, “*Meno male che Silvio c'è*.” Of course, there is some clear strategizing among these seemingly innocuous, “typical” images, including the mostly youthful composition of the actors involved, the “youthful” connotation of certain locations, such as the emblematic call-center (a contemporary Italian symbol of precarious and poorly-compensated employment), and the classroom (where both teacher and students are quite young). It is also noteworthy that among the various professions that appear in the video (*gelateria* employee, construction worker, waiter, and others), taxi-drivers, key opponents of some of the earliest attempted reforms of the previous Prodi government, make their appearance in support of Berlusconi.

The presence of the taxi-drivers and the emphasis on youth in the spot underline the political choices made in creating the video, and highlight an attempt by the Pdl to appeal to young voters (a strategy also seen in the aforementioned special policies designed for youth). At the same time, however, the video reinforces the distance between Berlusconi and his supporters generally, but also the distance between Berlusconi and the young more specifically. When the actors of the various vignettes that make up the video are brought together for the song’s finale, on the steps of the heavily fascist-connotated Palace of Italian Civilization (“Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana”), as it was coined, or Palace of the Civilization of Labor (“Palazzo della Civiltà del Lavoro”), they sing that the song is for Berlusconi (“Presidente questo è per te”), emphasizing not only an intense adoration of Berlusconi that seems prevalent among many of his supporters, but also reminds the viewer, and the voter, even if implicitly, of Berlusconi’s mythical and real position as *the* center-right, the heroic, and god-like lynchpin that holds all the parts together. It might be a tired point to make, but it is nonetheless true that this adoration and structural position of Berlusconi is clearly not the spirit of a democratic movement.¹⁹⁰

Together, then, the texts discussed here evince tensions in Berlusconi’s political protagonism. In both the Pdl’s platform and the video for “*Meno male che Silvio c'è*,” Berlusconi is invisible; yet the hagiographic adoration that he receives in *Meno male* belies any notion of true collective action among the center-right. At the same time, the youth-oriented policies of the Pdl’s program and the relatively youthful participants in the *Meno male* video suggest a concern for Italy’s young adults and, in the latter case, a type of movement inclusive of such members. Yet the language of the Pdl’s platform and the effective positioning of youth in *Meno male* — superficially connotated stereotypes and passive adoration of Berlusconi — underline Italian youth’s real positioning in Berlusconi’s politics: superficial appendages that are not integral parts of his political machine. A similar situation concerns the economic status of the protagonists of the Pdl’s program and the *Meno male* video. The program’s protagonists are employers; the video’s are employees.

¹⁸⁹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wxf-YbsSh0Y>. Last referenced December 12, 2012.

¹⁹⁰ Obviously the use of the *Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana* is a nod to the post-fascist elements and supporters of the Pdl.

While on the surface similar critiques could be leveled against a prominent video in support of Walter Veltroni's campaign, closer analysis shows that "*I'm PD – Con Walter si può fare*" offers a more nuanced and democratically healthy version of political support.¹⁹¹ The video, a take-off of the Village People's "YMCA," was created by a Milan supporters group of the PD, and while well-done, clearly lacks the professional production values of "*Meno male*." The overall feeling of the video, as one would expect from its YMCA instrumental accompaniment, is fun and informal, featuring various Italians, though predominantly the young and urban-based, in posed presentations of their daily lives (studying, working in an office, playing soccer, etc.). These Italians sing their reasons for voting PD (to really change politics, to have a modern Italy, to end political corruption), and while they include Veltroni in this reasoning — he is the symbol of the possibility of the PD's electoral victory and the hope that things really can change ("si può fare") — he is only an element of the larger message, which is really dedicated to the collective capacity to change Italy, and to mobilizing undecided voters to vote for the PD. The chorus of the song, "I am PD," underlines these collective and participatory aspects, and emphasizes how passive and deferential "*Meno male*" is.

More generally, the PD's electoral efforts were somewhat more difficult to categorize in regard to protagonists.¹⁹² The party's political program includes few identifying language features, namely a couple of first-person plural verbs, and two strong affirmations of PD beliefs: "The PD intends to prevent undesired life-sustaining measures through biological wills" ("Il PD intende prevenire l'accanimento terapeutico anche attraverso il testamento biologico") and "The PD promotes the recognition of the rights of domestic partners" ("Il PD promuove il riconoscimento dei diritti delle persone stabilmente conviventi.")¹⁹³ Aside from these identifying references, the PD's program is bereft of names, pronouns and similar information that clearly name a protagonist. While the image of Veltroni hovers over every page of the document (at least its PDF version, available online), his name does not appear one time in the PD program. Instead, the beliefs, affirmations, and proposed actions of the party are largely listed in bullet-points in an overly complex organizational structure.

A global contextualization of Italy's envisioned role in the world, made of 4 points, opens the document, and is followed by a one-point discussion of the need for, and possibility of, healthy economic development in Italy. This point is immediately followed by a 4-point list of the problems of Italy (discussed at greater length below), which itself is followed by the 10-point pillars of the PD program. These various points are then followed by the PD's proposed "12 Actions for Government," or what the PD will do if elected.¹⁹⁴ My perhaps overly detailed description of the PD's program here is intentional: it replicates the extremely precise content of the PD's proposals. Such specificity suggests that the protagonists of the PD, either the political engineers behind the document, or the "lay" individuals meant to take up its tasks, are intellectualistic and detail-oriented, perhaps too much so for a political context that needs real, specific information, but also generalized points that the politically disengaged, or simply very busy, can digest and consider. The PD's program also reveals that the party is open to new ideas: in no less than five cases the PD calls for political, social, or economic experimentation, or the implementation of experimental experiences of a similar nature, in fields ranging from education

¹⁹¹ "I'm PD—Con Walter si può fare." Viewed on December 14, 2012 at

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E0UBZ0z0bvo>

¹⁹² Downloaded from <http://www.partitodemocratico.it/doc/45315/> on December 14, 2012.

¹⁹³ 15

¹⁹⁴ 2-35

(teaching thematic courses in English) to national social policy (a national minimum wage program) with various sectors in between.

Walter Veltroni thus appears to have been less important to the left's campaign strategy than Rutelli in 2001 or Prodi in 2006. The theme of choral protagonism, somewhat inchoate in Rutelli's campaign but increasingly important in Prodi's effort, seems to have crystalized as a prominent campaign mode of the left in 2008, similar in many respects to the "horizontal" activism that became increasingly prominent in U.S. elections between 2004 and 2008. Such grassroots involvement was popular, though not populist, a type of inversion of Berlusconi's cultural and political activities, aptly described by Asquer as "popularesque," falsely popular, and ultimately populist.¹⁹⁵

While the "typical" nature of the center-left's informal protagonists (normal Italians from a variety of backgrounds) is in-line with many fictional protagonists of my sample — normal, down-to-earth, humble — the formal participants in such group protagonism, the official members of the PD and its affiliates, with their overly intellectualistic and abstract proposals, seem a long distance from their fictional counterparts. The decision to contrast Berlusconi's past style of overpromising with detailed proposals may have been admirable, but delivered in an overly intellectual way and often by a man lacking the charisma of Berlusconi or even Prodi, such methods may have failed to capture the attention or imagination of undecided voters.

Fiction

Aside from their mostly humble bearing and "normal" casting, the protagonists of my fictional programs of 2007-2008 escape easy generalization. **Rocca** was his usual down-to-earth, charismatic, and heartfelt self. In *La vita rubata*, Graziella, the protagonist of the first part of the film, is a seemingly perfect girl-next-door type with an optimistic take on the future. Her brother, who becomes the chief investigator/protagonist in the second half of the film, is a somewhat plain, but determined and duty-bound brother with a strong sense of justice and family. In *Rebecca la prima moglie*, Max de Winter, an outwardly cold and decorous English nobleman, is nonetheless a passionate and compassionate lover beneath the surface. He shares screen time with his new wife, Jennifer de Winter, a young and initially innocent, open-hearted woman of modest origins, who with time becomes a sophisticated and steeled aristocrat. While *I Cesaroni* leverages a choral cast to stretch its plots, a plausible argument could be made that the protagonists are Giulio, the head of the Cesaroni family, and Eva, his step-daughter. Giulio is mostly easy-going while leaning towards a more traditional view of the family, despite his modestly center-left politics; economically, he is clearly well-off, owning a *bottiglieria* and sporting a gigantic, American style house. Eva is an attractive and brilliant young idealist, whose elite background (her father is a wealthy Milanese businessman) tempers her interaction with her new family members and other parts of Roman society in the middle-class *Garbatella* neighborhood. In *Il capo dei capi*, Totò Riina is the foil to the fictional hero Biagio Schirò, a figure designed to represent the various martyrs in the Italian struggle with organized crime. Riina is ferociously evil and criminally brilliant, if simple. Schirò is humble, determined, rank-and-file, and noble.

¹⁹⁵ Enrica Asquer, "Popolare, popolaresco, populista." *Berlusconismo: Analisi di un sistema di potere* (Rome: Laterza, 2011), 102-19.

Problems

That the country's problems revolved around the economy was evidenced by both campaigns' focus on economic issues at the expense of items relating to ethical or social concerns such as euthanasia and gay rights. This economic anxiety caused the *Pdl*, in particular, to look back to earlier periods of Italian economic growth with an air of nostalgia. Interestingly, dealing with the past was the primary problem, or issue, of most of my 2007-2008 fictional texts.

The season's Maresciallo Rocca offering, the two-part *L'amico di infanzia*, meant as a series finale, looks back to the youth of Rocca as a happier, and more innocent, time, from a present riddled with corrupted friendships and blunt violence. In *La vita rubata*, the tragic abduction and 1985 murder of Graziella Campagna are replayed in dramatic form, along with the investigative cover-ups that marred initial attempts at justice. *Rebecca la prima moglie*, a televised adaptation of the du Maurier novel and later Hitchcock film, is set in a vague interwar world of the English aristocracy between Monte Carlo and the English countryside. Beyond this setting in the past, the mini-series' plot revolves around various characters' attempts to deal with the circumstances and the repercussions of Rebecca's death years earlier. Conversely, the series *I Cesaroni* is not only set in contemporary Rome, but is mostly consumed by brief, superficial problems of the present. Apart from this last example, then, the season's most important programs looked to the past for the settings and proposed solutions to the problems they presented.

Given the popularity of these backward-looking programs, in addition to the electoral success of the center-rights "nostalgic" campaign, the left in 2008 may have made several mistakes in presenting itself to the public. While victory was always unlikely for the PD, given widespread public dissatisfaction with the center-left's performance after its 2006 election, perhaps a more appealing campaign would have, in the uncertain economic times of 2008, looked back to a previous golden period and presented itself as a type of bridge to that rebirth. While perhaps unoriginal, it appears that voters and viewers, at least in 2008, were looking more for familiarity than for change, looking to the past for secure horizons rather than the uncertain future they faced.

Politics, Popular Culture, Gramsci: Education

A useful, and relatively novel perspective from which to consider these elements of the 2007-2008 season, as well as Berlusconi's wider political and cultural arc, is Gramsci's reasoning on education. Gramsci studied education in both its formal, scholastic, sense, as well as the informal and often unconscious learning humans perform throughout their life. The primary failings of formal education in Italy, according to Gramsci, were its exclusionary character, its emphasis on rote learning of humanistic and scientific information, and its divorce from the daily lives of most students and adult workers. Gramsci envisioned schools where manual labor and intellectual thought were merged (a reflection of his concept of praxis), as he believed had been done in the Soviet Union. Such ideal schools would be what the existing education system in Italy was not: financially, linguistically, and intellectually accessible to all; grounded in critical thinking; and aimed at giving students the mental tools to properly discern

“objective reality” in their daily lives. Gramsci also envisioned these schools, and education in general, as mentally challenging, involving hard work and discipline.¹⁹⁶

Such accessible, critical, and reality-based education was crucial to Gramsci’s conception of social and political domination and potential change, as best summarized in his much quoted affirmation: “every relationship of ‘hegemony’ is necessarily an educative relationship.”¹⁹⁷ Education, or learning, both formal and explicit and informal and implicit, of not just information or high culture, but especially of modes of behavior and ways of thought, is the basis for the consent that, with the potential threat of and/or practice of, coercion, undergirds the hegemony of dominant groups in given social formations.¹⁹⁸ What is assumed, what seems natural, is not, but is thought to be that way because of the “truths” which shape an individual’s upbringing and later social formation. Gramsci devotes substantial attention to the content and creation of these “truths,” which he considers in his examinations of common sense and folklore, as I discuss below.¹⁹⁹ First, however, I discuss how Berlusconi is an excellent counter-example of Gramscian educational principles because of his rhetorical reliance on pre-set philosophies, statistics, and facile, cynical logic that prey on individuals’ “common sense.”

Berlusconi’s ideal version of liberalism, and the tag “liberalism” itself, is forced onto any conceivable situation in his rhetoric, and is not employed as a truly rational, contemplative approach to the economy or other aspects of society based on, in liberalism’s ideal theoretization, limited, though equitable and necessary, regulations and competition. Instead, in Berlusconi’s rhetoric, “liberalism” is a term that denotes negative freedom and wealth.²⁰⁰ To unaware listeners or viewers these propositions are lent credence by Berlusconi’s reliance on statistics. Berlusconi, however, does not use statistics like the social scientist, with nuance, care, and attention to causation; he uses numbers bereft of context and method, as discussed in Chapter 3 of this

¹⁹⁶ These ideas on education and culture overlap in, and pervade much of Gramsci’s writings. Here my primary source has been the selection of writings chosen by Forgacs to represent Gramsci’s thought in these matters in Antonio Gramsci. *The Antonio Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings, 1916-1935*. Ed. David Forgacs (New York: NYU Press, 2000) : “Working Class Education and Culture”, 53-75. These writings originally appeared in articles written by Gramsci for several publications before his incarceration: “*Socialismo e cultura*” (“Socialism and Culture,”) *Il Grido del Popolo*, January 29, 1916; “*La scuola del lavoro*” (“Schools of Labour,”) *Avanti!*, July 18, 1916; “*Uomini o macchine*” (“Men or Machines,”) *Avanti*, December 24, 1916; “*L’università popolare*” (“The Popular University,”) *Avanti!*, December 29, 1916 ; “*Analfabetismo*” (“Illiteracy,”) *La città futura*, February 11, 1917; “The Problem of the School,” *L’ordine nuovo*, June 27, 1919; “Questions of Culture” (title given by Forgacs), *Avanti!*, June 14, 1920; “*Marinetti il rivoluzionario?*” “Marinetti the Revolutionary?” *L’Ordine Nuovo*, January 5, 1921.

¹⁹⁷ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*. Eds. Quintin Hoare & Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 350. Carmel Borg, Joseph A. , and Peter Mayo discuss this central link between hegemony and education, and the recurrence of this latter concept throughout Gramsci’s writings, in their introduction to their edited volume on Gramsci and education: “Introduction. Gramsci and Education: A Holistic Approach.” *Gramsci and Education*. Eds. Carmel Borg, Joseph A. Buttigieg, and Peter Mayo (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 1-24.

¹⁹⁸ Stanley Aronowitz. “Gramsci’s Theory of Education: Schooling and Beyond,” in Borg, Buttigieg, and Mayo, 109-120.

¹⁹⁹ Carmel Borg and Peter Mayo. “Gramsci and the Unitarian School: Paradoxes and Possibilities,” in Borg, Buttigieg, and Mayo, 2002, 87-108.

²⁰⁰ Paul Ginsborg has framed Berlusconi’s emphasis on “freedom” as the negative type discussed by Isaiah Berlin, as noted in Chapter 3 of this dissertation. See Ginsborg’s *Silvio Berlusconi: Television, Power, and Patrimony* (London: Verso, 2004), 3-6 and the Introduction to his co-edited volume with Enrica Asquer, *Berlusconismo: analisi di un sistema di potere* (Rome: Laterza, 2011), XXII-XXV. In this latter publication Ginsborg cites Berlin’s “Two Concepts of Liberty,” a 1958 essay, found in his *Four Essays on Liberty*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969).

dissertation in regard to his defense of his government's economic leadership before the 2006 elections: "your firms are now worth 54% more, the stock market has grown 54%, so all of your firms are now worth more, 82% of Italian families own their own house, housing prices have risen 25-40%, we've even raised the birthrate, what more do you want?"²⁰¹ "Liberalism" and statistics are then draped around Berlusconi's causal explanations of Italian society — economic, social, and political. Italy is not free because the magistrates are out to get him, as evidenced, in his rhetoric, by the number of cases and motions filed against him, given in list form; the economy is not productive because the left insists on too many regulations, again with the numbers of laws and regulations passed or eliminated by his party or the opposition then rattled off like an affirmation of fact.

Finally, Berlusconi's "educational" modeling of himself as an ideal type of Italian is also counter to Gramsci's pedagogical principles, though not in obvious ways. Berlusconi regularly offers himself as a paradigm of hard work in school, business, and every other endeavor he describes. But as outlined above, Berlusconi never invites his followers or even undecided voters to "sweat" at reasoning; there is no invitation to think in Berlusconi's rhetoric; he offers generic, repetitive, and absurdly easy solutions to his constituencies that dovetail well with existing frames of reference among the Italian public, particularly the religious and soccer metaphors, and to a lesser degree the business vocabulary that has consistently marked his discourse, as discussed in greater detail in Chapter 1. Within such frames, Berlusconi offers "logic" that simply extends and "elevates" (i.e. appears to add to scientificity and prestige to) what appear to be existing truths to individuals, i.e. common sense.²⁰² Gramsci recognized this cognitive terrain as fundamental in the effort to transform popular consciousness, and spent great energy in exploring its contradictory and haphazard, but occasionally penetrating and real, nature.²⁰³ Berlusconi has similarly recognized the importance of this "lay" intellect (as have advertisers the world over), though he has no interest in promoting any type of reflective examination of existing presumptions. This strategy derives in part from contextual factors like media delivery

²⁰¹ "Le vostre aziende valgono 54% di piu', la borsa e cresciuta di 54%, quindi tutte le vostre aziende sono aumentate di valore, l'82% delle famiglie italiane possiede immobili, gli immobili sono saliti dal 25 al 40%...abbiamo anche aumentato le nascite, cosa volete?" Berlusconi at the Confindustria conference held in Vicenza on March 18, 2006. Reviewed at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Fl_p81Brxw on March 14, 2014.

²⁰² This approach appears to be the communicative manifestation of what Giovanni Orsina sees as an important aspect of Berlusconi's influence: his celebration of the "real" Italy at the expense of the formal Italy of the State or the ideal Italy of intellectuals. In other words, Berlusconi does not see "real" Italy as something to be fixed, in contrast to most political leaders since the country's unification. This is an interesting idea, and might explain some of Berlusconi's success, but it is alarming that Orsina sees no cynicism or calculation in Berlusconi's discourse. Giovanni Orsina. *Il berlusconismo nella storia d'Italia* (Venice: Marsilio, 2013), 9-19.

²⁰³ Gramsci discusses common sense and folklore throughout the Prison Notebooks. Here my primary references to his thoughts have been through Forgacs' *The Antonio Gramsci Reader*, 323-362, "Philosophy, Common Sense, Language, and Folklore," and Kate Crehan's exploration of the utility of Gramsci's concept of common sense to anthropologists in her book, *Gramsci, Culture, and Anthropology* (Berkeley: Univ of California Press, 2002), particularly the sub-section "Common Sense and Good Sense" (110-115), and her further exploration of this idea in her article "Gramsci's concept of common sense: a useful concept for anthropologists?." *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 16.2 (2011): 273-287. Forgacs, Crehan, and Peter Thomas in *The Gramscian Moment: Philosophy, Hegemony and Marxism*. (Boston: Brill, 2009), 372-374, all note the important distinction to be made between the Gramscian "senso comune," which has a negative connotation of average, mediocre, thought, and the English "common sense," which generally has a positive connotation of quick and critical thinking. Gramsci envisioned and educational reformation that would lead to "senso comune" being replaced with a more critical and flexible "good sense."

systems that prefer soundbites to rational discourse, and limited education and cultural goals of some supporters; it also simply reflects Berlusconi's own existential emphasis on action, and his perception of truth as a reflection of existing results, not an abstract standard: "This is the truth and the truth is made of numbers."²⁰⁴

Berlusconi's "educative" rhetoric is Gramscian, however, in one fundamental way: it speaks to people in accessible terms relevant to their immediate interests. In 2001 one of Berlusconi's electoral posters promised, simply, "meno tasse per tutti" ("fewer taxes for everyone"); in 2006 he promised to abolish three taxes in the final three days of the election; in 2008 his plan to resuscitate the Italian economy and resolve its debt problems was similarly simple and understandable to "lay" citizens: sell public assets to pay the state's bills.²⁰⁵ In 2013 Berlusconi leveraged the *Imu* debate not only because the "*casa*" in Italian culture has a type of mythic symbolism, a super-trope that runs through many layers of Italian identity, but also because most Italian families were impacted by the difficult-to-avoid tax.²⁰⁶ In these cases, more abstract arguments in favor of greater equality or the need to shore-up the national budget to appease financial markets, face a difficult challenge. Such appeals to national and long-term altruism ask audiences to forgo immediate, and simple, gratification, in favor of abstract ideals or larger, perhaps less comprehensible policies that may or may not bear personal fruit in the future.

2007-2008 in Perspective

In 2008, then, it appears that Berlusconi's protagonism was more complicated than in past iterations, in both its content and with respect to its pop culture counterparts. Berlusconi nominally stepped back from the one-man shows of previous elections, as evidenced in the rather impersonal nature of the Pdl's 2008 program and his apparent absence in the *Meno male* video. This presentation was complicated, however, by the more detailed contents of these texts. In *Meno male*, Berlusconi is not present literally, but his figurative importance in the video underlines his status as *the* center-right, the charismatic and powerful figure that holds together Italy's conservatives. The video appears to promote, if passively, greater group, and greater youth involvement in Italian politics, but as revealed by the video itself, as well as the contents of the Pdl's 2008 program, Berlusconi, and his older and wealthier establishment colleagues, remained the principal protagonists of the political right in 2008.²⁰⁷ In an educative context, Berlusconi effects a "do as I say and not as I do" strategy.

²⁰⁴ This Berlusconi affirmation, already discussed in Chapter 3, was uttered during a 2006 debate with his opponent Romano Prodi "Questa è la verità e la verità è fatta di cifre."

²⁰⁵ For greater detail on these instances, see, respectively, Chapters 2 and 3 of this dissertation, as well as earlier sections of this chapter.

²⁰⁶ The *Imu* (*Imposta municipale unica*), a municipal property tax, was an unpopular measure initially adopted by the Monti government to help improve the Italian State's finances. In its initial formulation, it applied to all residences; it has since been modified to apply only to luxury homes or secondary residences.

²⁰⁷ In this way the video is an ideal condensation of the faux populism Berlusconi has come to embody. On one hand, Berlusconi, in certain instances of his self-projection, and his followers, are average (and in the video we "identify" with this portrayal of Berlusconi through his "avatars"—normal Italians). On the other, Berlusconi is a Superman, and in the case of this video, even more, a myth, not to be seen with the "normal" Italians he claims to represent. In fact, while I have not conducted a scientific review to confirm this idea, I believe that Berlusconi has not appeared in official, formal (i.e. not spontaneous) propaganda with "everyday" Italians; either a given piece of propaganda includes Berlusconi (and at times other elites), or the normal Italians, but never both. My ideas here have been influenced by two pieces of Umberto Eco's scholarship: "Fenomenologia di Mike Bongiorno," an essay

By comparison, Berlusconi's fictional counterparts in 2008 were again seen as humble, normal, figures, far from the mythologized Berlusconi praised in *Meno male*; these figures also performed what they preached. Veltroni, Berlusconi's political opponent in 2008, was positioned somewhere in the middle — not a typical Italian, nor reluctant hero, but also not the hagiographic figure that Berlusconi was. In such a configuration, Veltroni and the left did not just claim to be more democratic and participatory, they actually were. The syncing between Berlusconi and my pop culture samples was more direct in regard to the problems facing Italy. While the specific problems encountered varied, both spheres looked to the past for ideals to emulate or as the source of current problems. Here, the PD and Veltroni distanced themselves from their political and fictional counterparts, actively supporting experimentation and new ideas as a means to address the problems facing Italy, particularly the economic ones, which were also a concern to the Pdl.

In discussing Berlusconi's educative function in regard to these and other matters using Gramsci's relevant thoughts, I have argued that Berlusconi's is mostly non-Gramscian in his superficial use of statistics and facile reasoning. He is, however, very Gramscian in the targeting and framing of his arguments: he speaks of issues that are perceived as affecting his audience in direct ways, and he discusses these items in ways that are not only comprehensible, but also seem convincing, given their sheen of technical, statistical, support. While this addressing of problems by Berlusconi is different than that seen in my fictional samples, where statistics and logic are often absent, Berlusconi's educational function is similar to the fictional protagonists' in their emphasis on simplicity, and in their emotive framing. Berlusconi's statistics are not the cold numbers of the accountant, but rather key supports of a wider narrative of redemption, modernization, victimization, liberation, or other tropes that run through his discourse, as discussed in greater length in the earlier chapters of this dissertation. Here Berlusconi very clearly resembles the fictional heroes of this and other television seasons: he is a symbolic, biographical hero undergoing superhuman tests to lead Italy to prosperity. In this way he is very much a figure of popular culture, not only in the sense of a common currency to be discussed, ridiculed, imitated, etc., but also as a narrative protagonist that condenses social values and outlines good and bad for followers. In other words, his self-presentation and his political actions, and his description of these actions, narrativize contemporary Italy for Italians. It is a narrative that they may reject or accept, but it nonetheless offers them one very clear interpretation of their country from approximately the 1980s forward.²⁰⁸ As I have discussed,

dedicated to the exemplary mediocrity of the famous television host in *Diario minimo* (Milan: Bompiani, 2011) (originally published in 1963) and *Il superuomo di massa: Retorica e ideologia nel romanzo popolare* (Milan: Bompiani, 2012) (originally published in 1976), where Eco discusses the powers and qualities of the Supermen of 19th and 20th century popular literature. Berlusconi seems to have elements of both Bongiorno and the Supermen of such literature.

²⁰⁸ Alberto Abbruzzese has indirectly, and critically, glossed on this idea in his preface to his co-edited volume on Berlusconi, *Tutto è Berlusconi: radici, metafore e destinazione del tempo nuovo*. Abbruzzese notes that in relation to the "*ignoranza comune del nostro tempo presente*" ("common ignorance of our present," a play on "common sense"), Berlusconi "*insegna*" (teaches) and "*in-segna*" (a play on the Italian word for teaching that could be loosely translated as "signals" or "embodies." For Abbruzzese, Berlusconi teaches a particular way of life to Italians, while at the same time embodying the ignorance of said way of life, given what Abbruzzese sees as his inability to truly appreciate his own significance in his time. "Prefazione: Berlusconi insegna." *Tutto è Berlusconi*:

Gramsci's thoughts on education are useful for this consideration of Berlusconi's power, and how it relates to his political opponents and other figures of Italian pop culture.

Keeping this wider "educative" backdrop in mind, we can see that my 2008 findings echo some elements of my earlier analyses in Chapters 2 and 3, while adding nuance to others. In Chapter 2 I argued that in the 2000-2001 election and political seasons Berlusconi's self-portrayal differed from the principal characteristics of the season's fictional heroes and his political opponent. Berlusconi unabashedly extolled his super abilities, branding himself a type of Superman capable of resolving Italy's ills. His fictional and political counterparts were cast as modest, and often reluctant heroes. Berlusconi was in sync with his fictional counterparts, however, in the wider structure of their protagonism. While his opponent, Rutelli, sought, to some degree, to promote a type of choral, or group, political action, Berlusconi and the heroes of the season's fiction programs were mostly solo heroes; even when embedded in nominal teams, there was never any doubt, in either the programs or in Berlusconi's campaign, about who would save the day, relying mostly on their own abilities.

Berlusconi's approach to the campaign's notable problems also mirrored those of his fictional counterparts. Both spheres, political and fictional, "othered" problems, including those relating to the Italian State and foreigners, and simplified the causation of these issues. In reviewing these treatments of problems, and the focus on individual solutions to them, with Gramsci's thoughts on supermen and common sense, I argued that politics and popular culture promote and reinforce ossified common sense, which favors conservative thinking; in such a context, supermen offer easy tropes and easy solutions to complex problems, and are also more feasible, in terms of narrative, than stories of choral protagonism. I showed that this mirroring between politics and popular culture has existed throughout the modern Italian tradition, though with clear and notable exceptions and an asynchronous pacing (i.e. developments in popular culture have often preceded similar manifestations in politics, at least in regard to protagonists).

My analysis of the 2005-2006 election and television seasons similarly showed a syncing between politics and popular culture, though this mirroring was less intense than in 2000-2001. I noted that humility was again the principal characteristic connecting the protagonists of the two spheres, though Berlusconi did not entirely adhere to this ideal, despite his best efforts. Both spheres also coalesced around the problem of political and social unity, condensed into the negative figure of the tycoon. Interestingly, Berlusconi himself railed against this figure, in an attempt to portray himself as a political and economic outsider, despite his wealth and status as prime minister. Berlusconi continued to promote himself as a type of Superman, a framing that found less resonance in my fictional samples and in the campaign of Berlusconi's opponent, Romano Prodi.

In examining the political and cultural location of my 2005-2006 results in the contemporary Italian pop culture scene, I found that both my election materials' and fictional samples' emphasis on humility was not replicated in the tabloid or sporting press; my political and fictional critiques of tycoons was also not present in these important sectors of contemporary Italian popular culture. In reviewing the Italian tabloid and sporting press, I noticed that these sectors included a frank sexuality that was mostly absent in my political or fictional samples. In applying Gramsci's ideas on economic production and sexuality to these findings, I argued that while sex has clearly become an integral part of postmodern economies, particularly in contemporary Italy, there remain areas of public life, including, in the Italian case, political

radici, metafore e destinazione del tempo nuovo. Eds. Alberto Abbruzzese and Vincenzo Susca (Milan: Lupetti, 2004), 7-20.

discourse and fictional television programs, that audiences appear to prefer chaste. I hypothesized that Italian televised fiction's success from the 1990s forward may in part be due to its status as a safe harbor from the frank and often vulgar sexuality present in other areas of Italian popular culture, including the tabloid and sporting press. Similarly, I argued that Berlusconi's inability to separate his sexual scandals from his public persona, and the liberal and familial utopias he has typically proposed, was likely an important factor in his diminishing power after the onset of the global financial crisis in 2008. While this may seem obvious, it is important to remember that politics and popular culture in and around Berlusconi are frequently elided, as if the content of his political behavior and television networks were one and the same. While this elision may often be the case, it appears that Italians prefer their politics to be bereft of the sexuality typically associated with Berlusconi's television networks and other cultural outlets.²⁰⁹

In summary, it seems that despite the pop cultural significance of Berlusconi, he cannot be seen as a type of universal mirror of said culture. Undoubtedly, the simplicity, sexual tropes, emphasis on sport, and pseudo-religiosity of Berlusconi's political discourse is also present in numerous areas of Italian popular culture. But in other areas, including the television programs I analyze here, these facets appear to be less prominent or more complicated than often presumed. These programs do not contain the levels of sexuality found in other areas of Italian pop culture, like the *Cinepanettone* films, for example. While certainly simple, my television programs also appear to aspire to a sincere religiosity; even if their attempts are often sterile and hollow, they are not generated from a convenient, and cynical, "religiosity," as in the case of Berlusconi. Finally, the heroes of my samples seem to be genuinely reluctant; while Berlusconi pays lip-service to this idea, it is clear that he relishes the power and spotlight that come with his political and cultural role in Italy. These nuances complicate, though do not fully undermine, those analyses that posit Italian popular culture as being "Berlusconian."

Politics and Popular Culture in the United States: 2008 and Beyond

While I have not performed an extensive micro-analysis of specific texts in reviewing non-Italian cases of the relationship between politics and popular culture, the fairly broad considerations I have given to the American situation do allow for an initial comparison of the differing contours of the Italian and U.S. traditions. To review the American case I have studied secondary sources dedicated to, respectively, popular culture and politics, as well as works dedicated to these fields' mutual influence. I have also analyzed two primary texts for this

²⁰⁹ This undifferentiated "lumping" of all facets of contemporary Italian popular culture, and/or of politics and popular culture in Berlusconi's Italy is present, for example, in Massimiliano Panari's *L'egemonia sottoculturale: l'Italia da Gramsci al gossip* (Turin: Einaudi, 2010). Panari rightly considers different spheres of contemporary Italian culture, for example, the tabloid press, reality TV shows, televised talent shows (akin to American Idol in the U.S.) and quasi-political infotainment programs, and does so, in an interesting move, through a framing of the most prominent figures of these sectors—Alfonso Signorini (tabloid press, 35-52), Antonio Ricci (infotainment, 53-72), Maria De Filippi (talent programs, 73-88), Simona Ventura (reality TV, 89-106), Bruno Vespa ("political" programming, 107-120)—as types of Gramscian "organic intellectuals" (this is how he describes Signorini, borrowing from Gad Lerner's labeling of the editor of *Chi* and other Berlusconi outlets, 36), but it appears applicable to his discussions of the other figures as well. In all these cases, however, the ultimate feeling is that all these components make-up a uniform block of programming built around bodies, scandal, sex, and humor, with little real differentiation between them.

consideration of American popular culture and politics: the sixth episode (“There’s Always a Woman”) of the fifth season of *Desperate Housewives*, which aired on November 2, 2008; the seventh episode (“Rise Up”) of the fifth season of *Grey’s Anatomy*, which aired on November 6, 2008. I chose these programs and these episodes because they were the most watched fictional drama programs in the U.S. in 2008-2009 (fourth and fifth overall, respectively) and because these episodes fell closest to the date of the U.S. Presidential Election (November 4, 2008). I therefore analyze programs and episodes that were usually watched by numerous Americans (approximately 6.8 and 6.3 million, respectively) and that were relatively contemporaneous with the climax of the 2008 electoral season. I recognize that this approach is neither comprehensive nor scientific, but my goal here is to offer a brief comparison to the Italian case, not an exhaustive study of American politics and popular culture. The dates and statistics of this footnote come from the Internet Movie Database program information for the respective shows, as well as the relevant Nielsen TV ratings²¹⁰

In the United States, the form of political discourse has increasingly come to resemble that of popular culture, reminiscent, in many respects, of Berlusconi’s innovations in Italian politics. At the same time, however, the content of such American political messaging, or posturing, has kept somewhat more distance from its pop culture counterpart.²¹¹ For example, while the lofty goals of hope, understanding, and inclusion characteristic of the rhetoric of Barack Obama may still be prominent in American network television, a declining, yet still powerful instance of American popular culture, it is difficult to find any specific protagonist that embodies these ideals earnestly, that is without sarcasm, cynicism, or irony. Shows like *Grey’s Anatomy* seem to revolve around a moral message, with each episode opened and closed by a voice-over imparting a moral reflection on that week’s content, yet this generally sober message is arrived at through the representation of a personal and professional community often driven by personal ambition, sexual desire, sarcasm, and irony. Hope and unity in such cases are ideas that while superficially lauded, play out as syrupy platitudes that nominally redeem protagonists’ often selfish and/or skeptical behavior.²¹² *Desperate Housewives*, another popular television program of the 2000s, pokes fun at such lofty though often betrayed ideals, and its somewhat dark humor might reflect a zeitgeist of mainstream liberal, or “blue state” America in the 2000s: an ironic dismantling of traditional values.

Among generic “red state,” or conservative icons, George W. Bush’s “normal guy” persona, as well as his “cowboy” variant of this theme, find echoes in past protagonists of American popular culture, in particular, the various roles of John Wayne and the heroes of *Bonanza*, *Little House on the Prairie*, and other “frontier” programming. Yet the urban and

²¹⁰ <http://tvbythenumbers.zap2it.com/2009/05/27/american-idol-sunday-night-football-desperate-housewives-lead-top-adults-18-49-shows-for-2008-9-season/19505/> Accessed August 8, 2013.

²¹¹ My thinking here has been informed by the following texts, among others: LeRoy Ashby’s *With Amusement for All: A History of American Popular Culture since 1830* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2006); John G. Cawelti’s “Who’s Running This Show? Ideology, Formula and Hegemony in American Film and Television,” *Movies and Politics: The Dynamic Relationship*. Ed. James E. Combs (New York: Garland Pub., 1993), 31–54; James W. Caesar’s *Epic Journey: The 2008 Elections and American Politics*. (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2011); James E. Combs’ *Polpop 2: Politics and Popular Culture in America Today* (Bowling Green: Popular Press, 1991); *Polpop: Politics and Popular Culture in America* (Bowling Green: Popular Press, 1984), and Lance Strate’s “Heroes: A communication perspective” *American Heroes in a Media Age*. Eds. Susan J. Drucker and Robert S. Cathcart (Cresskill: Hampton Press, 1994): 15-23.

²¹² Julia Hallam, “Grey’s Anatomy: scalpels, sex and stereotypes.” *Journal of Medical Ethics: Medical Humanities*. June 2009, Vol 35 No. 1.

suburban, every-day heroes of much of the United States' present popular culture lack the religiosity and pro-business sensitivities of Bush, while contemporary cowboy manifestations in U.S. popular culture seem to be somewhat dark or otherwise critical twists on the frontier hero; the cowboy or "everyday Joe" of "country music" or "southern" culture in the U.S. might be the closest instance of a Bush-like entertainment persona, but these too have often become rather sophisticated commentaries on a stereotype, with examples including Larry the Cable Guy and Jeff Foxworthy.

Perhaps the worlds of popular culture and politics in the United States most intensely coincided in the United States in the 1980s, though even then in only select cases. Various scholars have noted the generically wholesome values and positive outlook of important examples of pop culture from this period, the *Cosby Show* being perhaps the most-cited example, tying such a worldview to that of Ronald Reagan, perhaps the most significant American political "performer" in the postwar period.²¹³ Much has been made of Reagan's narrative performance of the U.S. presidency, and it should not surprise that Berlusconi, always a great admirer of the United States, seems to have replicated, intentionally or not, the entertaining and dramatic presentation of politics that is often associated with Reagan. In both cases the application of "cultural" communication techniques to politics (in Reagan's case from acting, in Berlusconi's from advertising), seems to have been at the heart of a political operation intent on simplifying society and promulgating a vision of a conservative utopia.²¹⁴

The techniques of Reagan and Berlusconi are not specific to the political right, however. In 2008 Barack Obama was able to defeat Hillary Clinton in the Democratic primary, and then John McCain in the U.S. presidential election, in part because of his mobilizing discourse, which was visionary, idealistic, and personal, full of both abstract goals and his private experiences, very reminiscent of both Reagan and Berlusconi.²¹⁵ At the same time, Obama often delivered such messages through collective affirmations, relying heavily on "we" and "our" to underscore the group responsibility and potential in his message (the famous "Yes We Can" slogan being just one example of such discourse). This emphasis on collective experience and action was similar to that of Reagan in his vision for and of the United States.²¹⁶ It differed somewhat from Berlusconi's heavy emphasis on himself in his campaigns, as discussed earlier in this dissertation.

²¹³ There are numerous studies of Reagan's "performance" as President and/or his narrative presentation of the United States. These include, but are by no means limited to, Jan Hanska's *Reagan's Mythical America: Storytelling as Political Leadership* (New York: Palgrave, 2012) and Anne Norton's *Republic of Signs: Liberal Theory and American Popular Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

²¹⁴ Donatella Campus has noted the growing similarities between American and Italian campaign rhetoric with the increasingly personalization and mediatization of the latter, a process of which Berlusconi is clearly the most important example. Campus has noted, in particular, the increasing importance of dreams and journeys as aspects of the rhetoric of contemporary Italian political leaders, including Berlusconi, who remains the most important example of this trend. Leaders, dreams and journeys: Italy's new political communication." *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 7, no. 2 (2002): 171-191.

²¹⁵ Here too there are numerous sources for Obama's rhetoric. Here I have used, among others: Craig Allen Smith's *Presidential Campaign Communication: The Quest for the White House* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010); Alison D. Howard and Donna R. Hoffman's "Talking to Millennials: Policy Rhetoric and Rhetorical Narratives in the 2008 Presidential Campaign." Eds. Mitchell McKinney and Mary C. Banwart, *Communication in the 2008 U.S. Election: Digital Natives Elect a President* (New York: Peter Lang, 2011); Douglas Kellner's "Barack Obama and Celebrity Spectacle." *International Journal of Communication* 3 (2009), 715-741; Stefania Hammer's "The Role of Narrative in Political Campaigning: An Analysis of Speeches by Barack Obama." *National Identities*, 12:3, 269-290.

²¹⁶ See Hanska, among others.

Obama also appeared as a hero in the 2008 election, in both his own campaign and the American press. Such a positioning is not surprising, but it is worthy of mention. Obama's principal 2008 opponents, Hillary Clinton (in the Democratic primary) and John McCain (in the general election), were also heroes in their own right — Clinton as a paragon of political achievement in spheres still largely male in their personnel and prerogatives, McCain as a decorated war hero. Yet as the U.S. veered towards crisis in the months leading up to the national election (as a result of the unfolding subprime mortgage crisis and then implosion of investment bank Lehman Brothers), Obama appears to have been anointed, by his supporters and much of the mainstream press, as the “celebrity-savior” (my term) that would right the historical wrongs of U.S. history and rescue the American people from the rising tide of foreclosure, unemployment, and wartime quagmire.

At the same time, however, anti- or non-heroes generally predominated as protagonists of the popular television programs of 2008, such as *Two and A Half Men*, *House*, and the aforementioned *Desperate Housewives*. It is from such programs, among other channels, that celebrities arise, becoming the focus of much media content. The values and figures these characters and actors represent (often it is not clear where one begins and the other ends in the popular presentation/memory of these celebrities) carry cultural influence, even if only through passive accumulation. Obama's ability to be a celebrity and a hero allowed him to leverage tremendous media attention to promulgate an inspiring (to his supporters), inclusive, pro-active political message, that was not immediately tied to consumption, sexuality, irony, or cynicism, as typical with many faces of contemporary U.S. popular culture. This is both similar to and different from Berlusconi's political and cultural significance.

Berlusconi became, and has remained, a celebrity; yet whereas Obama's 2008 political configuration was somewhat at odds with prevailing trends in American popular culture, at least in regard to the protagonists and of important television programs, Berlusconi's has often, though not always, been in-sync with such popular culture trends.²¹⁷ This is an admittedly “unsexy” framing of Berlusconi's “celebrity” relation to Italian popular culture, but a frank assessment of my research suggests that while Berlusconi closely shadows prominent aspects of important areas of Italian popular culture, such as the “religious” framing of his personal sacrifice and/or the anti-establishment bent of his political theatrics and the similar narrative arc of many of the most-watched contemporary Italian television programs, among other examples, in others aspects and in other areas his ideas and behaviors either outpace similar concerns in the pop culture sphere, or are not present. Berlusconi's heteronormative and body-conscious approach to gender and sexuality is also present in Italy's tabloid and sporting press, but mostly absent from the television programs I analyze.²¹⁸ Berlusconi has also repeatedly cast himself as a

²¹⁷ Dictionaries typically define a celebrity as a famous person, or as someone that is well-known. I do not believe such definitions fully capture the meaning of “celebrity” in the 21st century, nor do they correspond to exactly what I mean by “celebrity” here. I believe “celebrity,” as it is currently used, in the U.S. and Italy, conveys notions of not only fame (itself different from being “well-known”), but also a status as a type of a charismatic ideal type (positive or negative, “real” or “postured”), and a status of consistent exposure in prominent media outlets. Here, for example, I would not define John McCain as a celebrity—he lacks, and lacked, the charismatic nature of Obama, for example, or even other figures such as the Kardashians. In Italy, I do not consider Romano Prodi a celebrity. He is well-known, and even perhaps famous, but he is not a celebrity—he is not seen by a significant number of Italians as a type of ideal, and he lacks the media-friendly charisma of Berlusconi and other figures such as Putin, Sarkozy, and Tony Blair.

²¹⁸ This is not to suggest that these programs are legitimately gay-friendly or uninterested in female bodies; they do not include, however, the seemingly virile, proactive promotion of heterosexuality at the expense of

reluctant hero, but his consistent refusal to go “quietly into the night” or otherwise lessen his public role undermines this positioning. This is in direct contrast to the heroes of my sample television programs, who consistently portrayed as protagonists that would much rather do mundane, and familiar, activities rather than save the day/world, etc. Despite these divergences, the frequent parallels between Berlusconi’s pronouncements and his behavior, and the wider cultural discourse of Italy from the 1980s forward, bring to mind Reagan’s positioning in the United States in the 1980s. While clearly a contributor to the “conservative” mainstream culture of 1980s America, Reagan also caught the zeitgeist of the “me decade” after the contentious, and economically difficult, 1970s. Berlusconi has done the same, but for much longer than Reagan. For this dissertation, the significance of this close affinity between politics and popular culture lies in the reinforcing mechanisms of such popular narratives. As discussed in Chapter 2, such broad, repetitive, and often acritical messaging across both the political and cultural spheres serves to strongly shape the basic assumptions, or common sense, of a given society; this base is obviously implicated in the wider and more visible manifestations of power in society, as I discuss below in the concluding section of this dissertation.

Hegemony and National-Popular Culture? Berlusconi’s Past, Present, and Future Positioning in Italian Politics and Popular Culture

Understanding Berlusconi’s role in Italian politics and popular culture can be difficult because his influence lends itself to so many potential interpretations (and the variety of approaches to, and interpretations of, Berlusconi in Ginsborg and Asquer’s *Berlusconismo* and Carlo Chiurco’s edited volume *Filosofia di Berlusconi* is telling).²¹⁹ While this premise might seem paradoxical, what I am suggesting is that Berlusconi can be broken down into many parts, and framed from a variety of theoretical angles; many of these angles are not mutually exclusive. For example, there are partial parallels and connections between Berlusconi’s rhetoric of the liberal market, in all its permutations and variances, and his view and treatment of women. The same could be said for the aesthetics of Berlusconi’s self-presentation and the populist content of his political messaging. Identifying these individual instances is not difficult; drawing the lines between them, knowing where one starts and one stops, if at all, is.

Ginsborg and Asquer have most notably attempted to plot the dynamics of Berlusconi’s influence by mapping its economic, political, and cultural components. My coverage of Berlusconi’s protagonism falls between the last two areas, though it is perhaps closer to the rubric of this last sphere. Throughout this dissertation, and here in this conclusion, I have fleshed-out in some detail where Berlusconi fits, as a symbol, an educative one, in relation to

homosexuality, or the vulgar demonstration of female bodies that is typical in much of Berlusconi’s discourse, and other areas of Italian popular culture, such as the tabloid and sporting press noted above.

²¹⁹ In this former instance, *berlusconismo* is considered from the perspectives of class, gender, aesthetics, language, media, clientalism, and finance, among others. In Chiurco’s *Filosofia di Berlusconi: l’essere e il nulla nell’Italia del Cavaliere* (Verona: Ombre corte, 2011), Berlusconi or *berlusconismo* is examined from similar perspectives, with more specific analyses devoted to the significance of Berlusconi’s body, virility, approach to gender equality, “nihilism,” media control, and Catholicism in contemporary Italy. Giorgio Bocca’s *Piccolo Cesare*, (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2002), considers Berlusconi through the usual economic, judicial, and domestic political lens, but also examines Berlusconi’s relation to international affairs and environmental matters, among others. Pierfranco Pellizzetti’s *Fenomenologia di Berlusconi* (Rome: Manifestolibri, 2009) looks at the leader’s aesthetics, vocabulary, and relationship to women—sexual and political.

other heroes of Italian popular culture, in particular the protagonists of important fictional television programs. My study, and my findings, clearly have similarities to the aforementioned scholars'; where my work not so much differs, but perhaps delves deeper, is in the "heroic" nuances of Berlusconi and the fictional protagonists studied here.²²⁰ As discussed in greater detail in the specific case studies of previous chapters of this dissertation, while the general contours of Berlusconi's public persona are mostly continuous, this persona is not fixed, and includes some dynamic, circumstantial, repositioning and tension. Thus Berlusconi is both the master of crude *barzellette* and intentional, "everyman" diplomatic gaffes (especially after his 2008 election), while simultaneously playing the role of sober statesman (particularly, though not only, in the 2001 election and its aftermath); he is both the erudite "intellectual" (he would never agree to the term, but how else to describe someone who has boasted of their prefaces to the works of Erasmus and Machiavelli?) and the plain-speaking straightshooter, gladly referring to Italians as "dickheads" and crassly taunting industrialist Diego Della Valle (in 2006).²²¹

These affirmations will not surprise scholars of Berlusconi, and even the non-initiated will quickly recognize the validity of the above descriptions. Where I see my study adding value, however, is in attempting to contextualize these and other characteristics with respect to other

²²⁰ My findings differ somewhat, perhaps one could argue superficially, from Ginsborg and Asquer's bracketing of Berlusconi's *discorso culturale* in the largely non-immediately commercial nature of the programs examined here. While these programs are used by broadcasters to sell audiences to advertisers, a fundamental aspect of the present Italian economic system, the programs themselves do not seem to promote consumption or even a capitalist credo.

²²¹ Berlusconi insulted Della Valle at the *Confindustria* conference discussed earlier in this chapter, as well, and at greater length, in Chapter 3. I was unable to locate Berlusconi's prefaces to Erasmus of Rotterdam's *In Praise of Folly*, Machiavelli's *The Prince*, and Thomas Moore's *Utopia*, though these prefaces are discussed in his 2001 tabloid biography, *Una storia italiana*. For greater details, see the discussion of *Una storia italiana* in Chapter 2 of this dissertation, as well as

http://archiviostorico.corriere.it/1994/febbraio/20/Berlusconi_Principe_spot_co_0_94022011745.shtml

One of Berlusconi's remarks (as reported in *Una storia italiana*) in his preface to the work of Erasmus may shed light on how he sees his own communication: "...In questi ultimi tempi sono portato ad ammirare l'eccezionale ricchezza dell'arte della comunicazione che vi è dispiegata. Come l'uso istintivo, magistrale, della battuta arguta, del motto di spirito, dell'immagine incisiva, del tono apparentemente lieve e scherzoso per affermare verità anche amare e sostenere coraggiose posizioni morali." ("Recently I have come to admire the exceptional wealth of the art of communication that is described [in *In Praise of Folly*]. Like the instinctual, masterful use of the witty remark, the spirited maxim, of the incisive image, of the apparently light and playful tone to assert even bitter truths and to support courageous moral positions.") Taken from *Una storia italiana*, 27.

In an unpublished Spring 2014 undergraduate thesis, "The Method in Berlusconi's Madness: His Gaffes as a Window into Contemporary Italian Politics & Culture," Elisa Fattoracci at the University of California, Berkeley, has investigated the role of Berlusconi's gaffes in his wider political communication, and with respect to notions of Italian identity from the country's unification forward. She notes that such gaffes buttress his "outsider" positioning by breaking with traditional decorum, and also make criticism of him more difficult, since the gaffes also serve as a type of preemptive lightening of Berlusconi's persona and of the political context. Fattoracci notes that Berlusconi's often clownish behavior, while representing a political novelty, continues notions of Italy, domestically and internationally, as a type of simplistic, irreverent, uncontrollable, child, an idea she partially borrows from Susan Stewart Steinberg's *The Pinocchio effect: On making Italians, 1860-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007). Fattoracci also draws on Alberto Gangemi's functional analysis of Berlusconi's gaffes: "Stile e habit nella leadership politica. Il caso delle gaffes di B." *Politica 2.0, Acts of the Associazione italiana di studi semiotici*, 2009.

fictional heroes of Italian popular culture (I use “fictional” to describe Berlusconi intentionally here — as real as he is, he has all the narrative makings of a fictional character, complete with backstory, nemesis, ongoing conflict and ever-increasing tension, etc.). I have used the heroes of my selected television programs to draw out how typical Berlusconi is, or is not, in relation to other heroes of Italian popular culture. As I have shown, in certain instances, Berlusconi is reminiscent of these protagonists — he saves the day, his talents are superior, and he looks out for the little guy. But in other ways, Berlusconi is anything but a typical hero of contemporary Italian popular culture. His emphasis on individualism, liberalism and consumption is not replicated in most of the fictional characters I examine, where if anything, a religious or secular concern for the general welfare (a more or, in the better cases, less, cliché “*buonismo*”) seems to predominate. Berlusconi’s frequent self-promotion is also absent from the televised heroes of my study, where humility and at times self-deprecation are the norm. Further, the fictional heroes of my study are mostly reluctant — they do not seek attention and are eager to return to the tranquility of “normal” lives; earlier in his career Berlusconi paid rhetorical lip service to this idea, part of his “martyr” narrative, but it is clearly not an authentic framing of his persona. Berlusconi’s treatment of women is also largely absent from my fictional protagonists’ behavior. It is true that Italian fiction has, in the cases examined here, been male-centric in its choice of stars, and many successful programs during the period considered here relegated women to supporting roles and less agency within their respective story arcs; but the explicit mysogyny or condescending “*galantomismo*” of Berlusconi are also not typical characteristics of the fictional Italian heroes examined here; this is not to say that these men are paragons of gender equality, but they do not share Berlusconi’s often exploitive and dismissive approach to women.

Gramsci

Taking stock of these characteristics of Berlusconi and his fictional counterparts, in this dissertation I have interpreted the power of Berlusconi’s cultural persona with several of Antonio Gramsci’s key concepts. Gramsci’s ideas offer powerful tools for a consideration of Berlusconi; not least because of their basis in Italian reality, a type of “anchor” for the longitudinal analysis of the relationship between politics and popular culture in the country. Such a longitudinal consideration helps to provide vertical, or chronological context to the Berlusconi phenomenon.

I have also used Gramsci’s ideas as the basis for my evaluation of Berlusconi because they form part of an “organic” conception of politics and culture that, if lacking in contemporary detail, is rich in theoretical flexibility. The touchstone of this thought is Gramsci’s theory of hegemony, a word now used regularly by scholars and non-academics to describe almost any situation of power.²²² The “popular” is important here, not only as a key to Berlusconi’s success, but also as a delimiter of my own work. Other scholars have dealt with Berlusconi through the

²²² A search for “hegemony” in Google Scholar returns 384,000 results; a general Google search approximately 5 million (at least as of September 2013). While obviously an imperfect indicator, these figures given an idea of both the popularity and usefulness of the term, as well as its’ potential overextension and abuse. In addition to other authors cited throughout this dissertation, in particular Forgacs’ comments on the subject in the Gramsci Reader, my understanding of Gramsci’s concept of hegemony has been influenced by Perry Anderson’s “The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci,” *New Left Review*, 100: 5-80, 1977, Peter Thomas’. *The Gramscian Moment: Philosophy, Hegemony and Marxism* (Boston: Brill, 2009), Renate Holub’s *Antonio Gramsci : Beyond Marxism and Postmodernism* (London : Routledge, 1992), Kate Crehan’s aforementioned *Gramsci, Culture and Anthropology*, and Walter Adamson’s *Hegemony and Revolution: a Study of Antonio Gramsci’s Political and Cultural Theory* (Berkeley: Univ of California Press, 1983).

lens of more abstract political philosophy or the high-culture complicity in Berlusconi's rise.²²³ I contextualize Berlusconi within the popular aspects of politics and culture. I think adding to our understanding of how Berlusconi "heroically" works in and between these spheres is the important contribution this dissertation can make to the extensive literature that already exists on the "Cavaliere."²²⁴

This emphasis on the popular is why I am tying my consideration of Berlusconi and hegemony to Gramsci's notion of the national-popular. This concept, describing, over the modern historical arc of Italy, either a lacking or, more recently, a potentially dominant, cultural aspect, and political mode, of the country, has become a fundamental facet of the exercise of power in Italy, though it is not clear if this will be the case in the future. Because of the uncertainty of the national-popular, not only in Italy, but globally, in a time of the increasingly fragmentary potential of digital media, I also consider the role of charismatic populists in the near and longer digital future of Italy.

Hegemony

At its core, Gramsci's conception of hegemony theorizes political control as resulting from domination and consent. While these terms and their constituent components are fluid and dynamic in Gramsci's writings, and in those of scholars' who have adapted his ideas, the cultural elements of a society, such as those I discuss here, are most often situated on the "consent" side of the equation, though it must be stressed that such acquiescence is not a simple referendum-like "yes," but rather a general agreement on, and lack of validity of alternative ideas to, the standard premises and mores of life. "Consent" thus includes those ideas we take for granted, the limits we pose on possibility, and the critical methods we employ to verify "truth." I see the "consent" aspect of hegemony as encompassing the assumptions and perceived possibilities on which cultural forms, such as television programs, tabloid magazines, and other material considered here, rest. In Gramsci's conception of hegemony, such parameters of consent derive from and influence the economic-political configuration of the dominant social class, part of a continually evolving, unstable, power dynamic.²²⁵

In the case of Berlusconi, I am not alone in referencing Gramsci's ideas as an explanatory framework. Alessia Ricciardi, as well as Massimiliano Panari, as discussed earlier in this dissertation, have similarly found Gramsci's conceptions of the relations between political and cultural power compelling tools to analyze this relationship in the late 20th and early 21st

²²³ For example, Alessia Ricciardi's *After La Dolce Vita: A Cultural Prehistory of Berlusconi's Italy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), as well as Chiurco's *Filosofia di Berlusconi: l'essere e il nulla nell'Italia del Cavaliere*. Lucia Re has recently criticized Ricciardi's work for, among other things, its unrealistic expectations of Italian intellectuals in the 1970s and 1980s, and its simultaneous restricted selection of intellectuals to study. Re makes valid points, but Ricciardi's overarching argument of a less directly critical Italian intellectual sphere from the late 1970s forward appears to be correct. "Pasolini vs. Calvino, One More Time: The Debate on the Role of Intellectuals and Postmodernism in Italy Today." *MLN* 129, no. 1 (2014): 99-117.

²²⁴ Google Scholar yields approximately 20,200 results for "Silvio Berlusconi." A general Google search takes that number to approximately 5.5 million. A similar search for Benito Mussolini yields approximately 25,000 and 916,000 results, respectively.

²²⁵ Anderson; Crehan, 2002, 99-105; David Forgacs, "National-Popular: Genealogy of a Concept." *Formations of Nation and People* (London: Routledge, 1984), 83-98; and "Hegemony, Relations of Force, Historical Bloc." *The Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings, 1916-1935*. Ed. David Forgacs (New York: NYU Press, 2000), 189-221.

centuries.²²⁶ Obviously, as in my case, this tendency is in part due to the Italian connection between Gramsci and Berlusconi; as noted earlier in this dissertation, Gramsci's work is a useful tool for considering contemporary Italy not just because of the strength of his ideas themselves, but also because their Italian context helps to better understand what has come after, including Berlusconi. But numerous scholars in other national contexts have similarly turned to Gramsci since the wider diffusion of his writings from the 1960s forward, and this must be seen, in part, as a result of the increasing importance of the culture industries (and here I have in mind the "information" industries associated with computer technology as well) in macro-economic and daily life from at least the 1980s forward, not only in Italy but worldwide.²²⁷ As literacy rates and content diffusion technologies have accelerated, culture, understood beyond its anthropological sense, has become increasingly important to life experience.

This drastically increased importance of information and culture is the original premise for Berlusconi's initial ascent to power — not official political office, but an economic weight and cultural influence arising from his near "first-mover" advantage in Italian private television. It would be too simple to say that Berlusconi's cultural power, developed in the 1980s, mechanistically led to his election in 1994, but it is certain that this consolidation laid the groundwork for the potential of his election — his apparent business savvy, dynamic persona, and semblance of a specific type of modernity resonated with various voters not solely due to dissatisfaction with the political class after the *Tangentopoli* scandal of 1994. The sensibilities of such voters had been influenced — not dominated, which is too strong of a word, given what we know about audience interaction with television and other forms of culture — by the drastic extension of commercial programming, particularly its advertising component, in the 1980s.²²⁸ This clear link between culture and official politics in Berlusconi — the man but also the symbol — is what makes him such an interesting target for Gramscian analysis. Here I attempt to add some specificity to this consideration of culture and politics in Berlusconi, outlining how I believe his heroic persona relates to the protagonists of Italian popular culture; in comparing such political and cultural figures (and I recognize that these distinctions are somewhat artificial, since the political clearly has cultural elements and vice versa, but they are necessary for an operational description of their interaction), we can see how these figures reinforce, or do not,

²²⁶ Panari; Ricciardi. In her work on Gramsci's conceptualization of intellectuals in the contemporary context, Renate Holub has discussed the role of such figures in the age of information technology. While the context Holub describes is now somewhat dated, the wider consideration of intellectuals in their technological context is important, and still missing in many considerations of Italian culture, high and low, including, in part, this dissertation. Aside from their appearances in tabloids, television programs, etc. the heroes, and the intellectuals, of Italian culture also circulate through the Italian collective imagination through blogs, viral videos, etc. Of course, cultural heroes and intellectuals also arise from these platforms, a situation that appears to be relatively understudied in mainstream American Italian Studies, at least. Holub, 151-190.

²²⁷ One well-known example of Gramsci's non-Italian significance is the extensive utilization of his ideas in (post)colonial environments and other instances of "subaltern" social configurations in both the "global south" and North American and European contexts. A brief gloss on the importance of Gramsci's ideas in one particular (post)colonial case, specifically the development of Gramsci's idea of hegemony in India, can be found in Ranajit Guha, "Gramsci in India: homage to a teacher." *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 16.2 (2011): 288-295. In the European case, perhaps the most well-known, and influential, use of Gramsci outside of Italy was Stuart Hall's, Raymond Williams' and other "founding fathers'" of Cultural Studies use of Gramscian concepts in their considerations of British and European culture between the 1960s and 1990s.

²²⁸ Among other notable texts, see: Ien Ang's. *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination*. (New York: Methuen, 1985).

hegemonic qualities in contemporary Italy, noting which aspects of these heroes, certainly powerful symbols of the values at play in the country, appear to be hegemonic (it is important to remember here that “hegemonic,” for Gramsci, does not mean “absolute” — all situations of hegemony are always in flux, constantly becoming and dissolving, growing stronger or weaker, and different, with time). Since I am concerned with popular heroes here, not least because organized “culture” in contemporary societies, at least in the West, is predominantly popular, in terms of quantitative weight and influence, Gramsci’s key complementary idea to hegemony, for my purposes, is the national-popular.

The National-Popular

Gramsci lamented what he saw as the non-national popular culture of Italy. In tracing the causes of this lack to Italian political and intellectual development from the Renaissance forward — a combination of foreign domination and domestic fragmentation in the political realm, cosmopolitan and elitist intellectuals paired with widespread illiteracy in the intellectual, Gramsci argued that a true political revolution could only be achieved through, and after, the creation of a national-popular culture — a culture that was accessible to broad swaths of the Italian public in terms of language and content. While Gramsci envisioned a national-popular culture leading to, and being part of, a political alliance between the Italian urban proletariat and rural peasants, the concept itself, like hegemony, is not specific to a given political persuasion. In contemporary Italy Berlusconi has helped to solidify, in the period considered here, a conservative national popular culture in Italy.²²⁹

The contours of this culture are not new or surprising for contemporary students of Italy. This predominant, though not absolutely dominant, culture entails: a feigned cultural populism that has, in the period considered, covered an elite concentration of the production and dissemination of culture, broadly defined; an acceptance of consumption as the typical paradigm of daily existence; the increased centrality of overt sexuality to public life, in particular the circulation of sexually-suggestive imagery of women; a pseudo-religiosity that places emphasis on Catholic rituals and facile cherry-picking of Catholic concepts that do not interfere with; a vision of hedonistic enjoyment as the definition of fulfillment in life.²³⁰

But if this is a fairly non-polemical description of a contemporary Italian national-popular culture, the fictional television programs and protagonists I have studied here offer some complications, or nuance, though not necessarily contradictions, to this picture. I have noted the popularity of these programs and their heroes throughout this dissertation, a popularity that signals that these items resonate with wide areas of the Italian population on some level — as modes of escape from daily life, as comforting paragons of potential virtue, and/or as affirmations of existing values. Yet most of these programs do not perfectly align, in the worlds they model, with the conservative national-popular culture of “Berlusconi’s Italy.” Instead, most of these programs might be seen as echoes, sometimes faint, sometimes loud, of this culture. The pseudo-religiosity described above finds some resonance here, though this alignment is not complete, since the spirituality of these programs’ often Catholic protagonists is frequently, though not always, cast as real and lived daily, not as a means to ritual or reflection of selective adherence. With notable exceptions, such as *I Cesaroni*, these programs also lack the overt

²²⁹ See Forgacs’ “National-Popular: Genealogy of a Concept” and Gramsci’s relevant thoughts in the section “Popular Culture” in *The Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings*, 363-378, as well as Massimiliano Panari’s *L’egemonia sottoculturale*, 11-20.

²³⁰ Panarari; Ricciardi; Ginsborg and Asquer.

sexuality readily seen in Italian tabloids and much variety or other programming on Italian television. These programs are also often not obvious promoters of consumption; clearly they are now developed to attract audiences to sell to advertisers, yet in the stories themselves explicit display, or even more subtle portrayals of consumption, are not common, at least in my samples. Instead, the emphasis in these programs is often on social collegiality and moral redemption.

These echoes, rather than pure exemplifications, suggest the fluidity and imperfection of the national-popular culture described above, but do not undermine it. As I have shown, the heroes and problems situated in this cultural milieu often overlap with those of the Italian political sphere, a situation that reinforces the presumptions and attitudes on which this “Berlusconian” national culture rests. At times, however, as also seen several times in this dissertation, the heroes and problems of the fictional programs I analyze diverge from Berlusconi’s Italian utopia, suggesting that while a powerful cultural model, his own “heroic” narrative, based on his own Superman status and a defective, permanently modernizing Italy, is far from dominant, at least in the popular Italian imaginary. These contrasts, sometimes stark, sometimes subtle, between Berlusconi and the heroes of Italian popular culture, will likely become increasingly accentuated in the near future. This is due in no small to Berlusconi’s loosening grip on the flow of information in Italy, which the Internet has, and will increasingly, weaken. I discuss this issue in relation to Berlusconi’s changing (in)ability to construct the narrative reality of Italy through his media in the television-centric Italy of the 1980s through approximately 2008, and the increasingly, though certainly not completely, digital Italy of recent years and the near future, in the final section of this dissertation. First, however, an attempt to put the pieces I have laid out here together.

Berlusconi’s Hegemonic National Popular Culture: Supermen and Common Sense

Keeping these discussions of hegemony and the national popular in mind, I now attempt to put the pieces of my Gramsci-Berlusconi puzzle together; when fitted properly, I hope to add nuance to our understanding of Berlusconi’s political and cultural preeminence in Italy for the last thirty years. Berlusconi, through his own performances and through the output of his political and cultural operations (a blend of hard and soft power), has cast himself as a type of Superman that is built on the presupposed impossibility of Italy to function normally.²³¹ This perception is encouraged and reinforced by political and cultural communication that promotes a simplistic and “natural” common sense (i.e. that sees phenomena as given, or natural, and not constructed), and that derides and threatens critical, reflective thought. In this role, Berlusconi has an educative function, not only in legal and scholastic terms (school reform, etc.), but most importantly as a symbol, a role model, that represents the epitome of success in this worldview. An important, though not unique, aspect of this modeling is a superficial and heteronormative sexuality centered on the body. Together, this is the national-popular culture that Berlusconi has

²³¹ Here my idea partially overlaps with Giovanni Orsina’s framing of Berlusconi’s relation to the wider functioning of Italian society. Orsina argues that Berlusconi has been successful, in part, because he tells the Italian public that it is fine, that it does not need the pedagogical or pathological corrections repeatedly envisioned by the Italian ruling class since Italian unification. While there is some merit to this idea, it is clear that Berlusconi has repeatedly argued for the lack of functionality, for structural or political reasons, of the Italian State and its representative institutions—parliament, the judicial system, etc. Orsina also makes this point, noting that Berlusconi puts himself on the side of the public in this situation, i.e. he too is a victim of the Italian State. Unfortunately, Orsina never questions this affirmation of Berlusconi, taking at communicative face value a positioning that is cynical and misleading. Orsina, 97-134.

helped to promote (an extension and amplification of existing Italian traditions in some cases, the creation of relevant new aspects in others), and which in turn has helped him to maintain his political and cultural influence before and after his times in office. This politico-cultural situation is hegemonic because of many citizens acquiescence to, if not pleasure in, a lifestyle centered on consumption, restricted critical reflection, and hedonism, a situation that has often deflected effective attention to the concentration of power to relatively few economic elites and political agents. “Effective” is the key term here, because the Italian public and press is aware of these problems; the effective reporting of such issues, however, as well as large-scale political mobilization to counter this situation, appear to have been sporadic or, if regular, lacking in general resonance. In part, this situation is due to a combination of political or economic subservience and a cynical take on public life and the inevitability of power, mentalities that have been reinforced by Berlusconi’s activities and parts of his rhetoric (particularly his anti-State discourse and focus on the private).

This is not a monolithic, hopeless, social configuration. The recent success of Beppe Grillo, to which I now turn, and to a lesser degree the PD, show that Berlusconi’s Italy is not a dictatorship in the traditional sense. But it must be noted that movements away from Berlusconi’s formal times in political power do not erase the difficulties of the Italian left, or other groups politically or culturally, to oppose Berlusconi on a wide and large scale, or prevent much of this area of political society from adopting or accepting the basic parameters of Berlusconi’s Italy (the absence or unsuccessful political attempts of the Italian left in relation to progressive politics in relation to gender, sexuality, and legality are indicative of this weakness or unwillingness).

“Berlusconi” and the Digital Future

Since his ouster from office in 2011, Berlusconi’s influence has waned. The recent splitting of the center-right, into Berlusconi’s revived *Forza Italia* and his former heir Angelino Alfano’s *Nuovo centro destra*, or New Center-Right (*Ncd*), in addition to the results of the 2013 elections, where Beppe Grillo not only made impressive inroads, but did so without television, is indicative of the shifting politico-media landscape in Italy. Grillo is reminiscent of Berlusconi in many ways, from his charismatic populism to often authoritarian control over his “movement”; but the means of his influence are largely network-based, relying on the passion and technical savvy of his supporters. Television remains a fundamental means of information in Italy, but increasing segments of the population, particularly youth, are turning in ever greater numbers to the Internet for news and entertainment.²³² Berlusconi is clearly vulnerable here, where greater pluralism and transparency (at least with respect to televised news and programs) are the apparent Internet norm in contemporary Italy.

²³² A February 2014 ISTAT (the Italian Statistics Agency) report noted that while only 33.5% of Italians use the Internet on a daily basis, more than half of users between 10 and 24 years old are online every day. While quite low in comparison to other developed countries, the trend is notably an upward one: since 2001 there has been a 27% increase in total Internet users in Italy, and an increase in daily use from a meager 7% in 2001 to the still paltry, though much greater, 33.5% noted above. These statistics help to explain the enduring “television” appeal (and power) of Berlusconi, as well as the rise of Grillo in recent years. ISTAT, *Noi Italia*, “Gli utenti di Internet.” [http://noi-italia2014.istat.it/index.php?id=7&L=0&user_100ind_pi1\[jid_pagina\]=7&cHash=5bc64b8e6db0cec1fa1aeb231b61c312](http://noi-italia2014.istat.it/index.php?id=7&L=0&user_100ind_pi1[jid_pagina]=7&cHash=5bc64b8e6db0cec1fa1aeb231b61c312) Accessed March 24, 2014.

Given Grillo's tight identification with, and rise to prominence through, online politicking, it can be illustrative to compare Grillo as a political icon of this medium with Berlusconi, the icon of Italian broadcast television.²³³ As Berlusconi made competition and consumption bedrock elements of his key signifier, freedom, Grillo has made transparency and accountability the hallmark elements of his anti-politics. The potential of such positioning is made possible and inspired by the accessibility and fluidity of information through the Internet. Digitalization drastically lowers transmission costs and, in the short-term, at least, allows for not only much greater speed and flexibility in the dissemination of information, but the ability to do so by bypassing most gatekeepers. In this potent "one-to-many" model, potentially great leverage accrues to "average" individuals, that might have access to the information of, but are not themselves part of, powerful establishments — i.e. figures like Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden. In essence, such information flows offer the possibility that political protagonism shifts from traditional elites to "normal people." I use "potential," "possibility," and other such qualifiers because Grillo shows that the aforementioned scenario is only practicable to a point. Grillo dresses himself in the vestiges of normality, complete with informal clothing, crude language, and simplistic appeals to common sense, yet he is a wealthy entertainer with pre-political notoriety and a staff of technical consultants behind him.²³⁴ At the same time, the activism of his supporters, at least at times, has been reminiscent of a positive popular politics — scalable public involvement to enact political change, similar to what was seen in Obama's U.S. election in 2008.

When compared to Berlusconi, Grillo thus resembles the former in his populist guise, but lacks the Superman presentation of his abilities and persona. This construction might be due in part to the differing media behind the two charismatic leaders. The Berlusconi era of broadcast television in Italy may have allowed for tighter control of information flows, and hence the ability to construct a heroic persona that garnered attention but not too much ridicule; in a developed Internet-impacted media sphere, however, true, durable heroes are rare; too much attention quickly pricks the public's adoring balloon, and few, if any, individuals can withstand critical scrutiny *and* maintain the public's interest. Instead, what seems to count for contemporary politics, not just in Italy, but in much of the West, is celebrity. Grillo's abrasive persona and past troubles were and are well-known to the Italian public. His notoriety, however, certainly aided his political rise, allowing him to grab a toe-hold of public attention, from which he has been able to secure consistent news coverage through his often soundbyte-friendly politics. Berlusconi too has understood the importance of celebrity in the changing mediasphere. Over time his personal narrative and presentation has tended to be based less-and-less on his super achievements (a type of liberal model-hero for many Italians) and more and more on soundbytes and polemical gaffes, coupled with his consistent trope of himself as a victim.

²³³ Christian Ruggiero has similarly compared Berlusconi to Grillo in regard to their political positioning and communication, focusing specifically on their "impolite politics." Ruggiero argues that both leaders' political communication can now primarily be bracketed as one of attack and denigration of opponents, using impolite expressions, tones, etc. Ruggiero's framing of Grillo and Berlusconi is accurate to a degree, though misses Berlusconi's continued insistence on being a type of gentleman, a properly behaving statesman, a positioning that Grillo has never assumed. Ruggiero, Christian. "Forecasting in the politics of spectacle, from Berlusconi to Grillo: the narrative of impolite politics." *Bulletin of Italian Politics* 4, no. 2 (2012): 305-322.

²³⁴ Most notably Gianroberto Casaleggio of Casaleggio Associati, a technology consulting firm and "curator" of Grillo's blog: <http://www.casaleggio.it/> While I have not reviewed the text, Casaleggio collaborated with Dario Fo in the pro-Grillo publication *Il Grillo canta sempre al tramonto: Dialogo sull'Italia e il Movimento 5 Stelle* (Milan: Chiarelettere 2013).

It thus seems that going forward Berlusconi will slowly fade away but “Berlusconi” the celebrity-politician will remain integral to Italian politics (Grillo and Matteo Renzi currently appear to be the most exemplary instances of this political figure). Dependent as such figures will be on grabbing attention in such a fragmented mediascape, we can expect increasingly soundbyte and image-based politicking in the near Italian future. Such a configuration favors agile, timely, and broad-based rhetorical savvy over longer-term actions and values, though this dichotomy need not be absolute.

The increasing mediatic and consequently political and social fragmentation that drives such “celebrity politics” may lead to paradoxical political and social developments that, while noteworthy, nonetheless continue trends in place in the West since at least the 1980s, if not earlier. These capital and technology driven developments, which foster global standardization and local personalization, to use apt technical terms, induce greater conceptual superficiality and an emphasis on the visual on the macro level, while at the same time creating the potential for greater conceptual depth and powerful specificity — linguistic, cultural, social, political — on the micro plane. As we can increasingly tailor our own personal visions of society, at least as funnelled through increasingly specific media outlets, the larger common denominators that tie different parts of the social fabric together become increasingly tenuous. In Italy, at least, this pluralization, and perhaps in many instances, democratic improvement of, the media, even if slow, will, ironically, undermine the potential for a Gramsci-esque national-popular culture, of any type, progressive or conservative. Such a situation suggests that the “Berlusconis” of the future will likewise embody a charismatic and spectacular form of politics, though they will be bereft of his wider cultural “syncing,” which, while never perfect, has nevertheless been the historically most significant facet of his influence.

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