

International Press: Italy, a Country Full of Confusion

Maria Rita Latta (April 11, 2008)



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Once again the international press dedicated several articles and analysis to the Italian elections. What is really discouraging is that the Italy facing the electoral campaign appears to be a country full of confusion, not aware of the serious crisis affecting it.

In the April 6 issue the New York Times Silvio Berlusconi and Walter Veltroni are seen by Rachel Donadio as "the usual suspects in a political landscape nearly incomprehensible to outsiders, where the same politicians fade in and out, promising reform and delivering stasis if not decline." It is a rather depressing scenario, showing a country apparently fitting to a movie or an operetta, with the center-right leader Berlusconi depicted as a "charismatic billionaire" and Veltroni as a "rock 'n' roll-loving baby boomer who just stepped down as mayor of Rome." Anyway, there is "a fringe candidate who is different." Donadio is referring to [Giuliano Ferrara](#) [2], "a Communist turned conservative who is Italy's most operatic and most mercurial intellectual provocateur. A newspaper editor and former government minister, Mr. Ferrara is best known here as a television talk-show host."

According to the New York Times, "Italy's political life has always been absurd, but Mr. Ferrara's recent theatrics touch on something deeper. He is a cultural barometer, highly attuned to the desperation of the national mood. More than the real-politiking of the mainstream candidates, Mr. Ferrara, with his insistence on ideas, taps into Italian anxieties about the future of Europe, the loosening of national identities, the rise of immigration, the decline of Christian belief."

"In his latest incarnation," continues Rachel Donadio, "Mr. Ferrara is running for Parliament on a small slate devoted to a single issue: 'pro-life,' which he defines loosely. An avowed atheist and nonbeliever, he has called for a 'moratorium,' but not a ban, on abortion, to call attention to the value of life." Giuliano Ferrara, is seen as a "longtime player in Italy's political tragicomedy," not a particularly nice definition of the present situation in the Belpaese! Then there is the history of Ferrara's political career, beginning as a Communist militant, passing through his faith in Socialism, and arriving at the conservative side: a personal trajectory that, according to the New York Times, "could be possible only in Italy, where the lines between politics and journalism, ideas and showmanship, appearance and reality, are ever blurred. To his supporters, Mr. Ferrara has admirably undergone transformations his country has been unable to achieve; they applaud him for trying to introduce ideas into a Machiavellian realm of pure politics. To his critics," continues Donadio, "he is an opportunist, a consigliere ever in search of a new prince, a misogynist meddler trying to draw Catholic votes away from the left." The conclusion of the article is a merciless portrait of Italy, a country where "a quick look at the major candidates can explain the impulse for radical theatrical gestures, if not perhaps for Mr. Ferrara's ideas themselves." In this panorama, in a pre-electoral atmosphere defined as "surreal," lacking interest, monotonous, Giuliano Ferrara's "campaign seems a cry for life in a country steeped in death and decline."

The April 6 issue of the Washington Post also devotes space to the Italian electoral campaign. In an article with a rather clear title, "Never Say Ciao," there is a list of quotations without a comment that create a dramatic comparison between Benito Mussolini and Silvio Berlusconi. The introduction of the article gives a view of the Italian situation: "'The past isn't dead,' wrote William Faulkner. 'It isn't even past.' He wasn't talking about Italy, but as the country heads to the polls next weekend to usher in its 62nd government since World War II, he certainly could have been. Back on the ballot is former prime minister Silvio Berlusconi, the country's richest man and the second longest-serving prime minister since the fall of fascist dictator Benito Mussolini. Berlusconi was only 8 years old when partisans strung up Il Duce by his feet in Piazzale Loreto in 1945. But from the sound of the debate, you'd think Mussolini were his running mate. In spirit, anyway." Then, there is a series of quotations by Berlusconi; for example, when he was lamenting the checks on his authority as a prime minister: "Only one man had power, and that's Mussolini. All the others . . . only had trouble." Or, conjuring images of the March on Rome by fascist thugs that propelled Mussolini to power in 1922, after the center-left government of Prime Minister Romano Prodi collapsed last January: "If we don't get an election, I think millions of people will go to Rome to demand one." The quotations of the Washington Post involve Berlusconi's allies, too. So, there is Giuseppe Ciarrapico, candidate for the Senate in Berlusconi's coalition, giving a sincere explanation of the reason why portraits of Mussolini hang in the newsroom of the local papers he owns: "It's a beautiful thing." Or Daniela Santanchè, hard-right candidate, reminding Alessandra Mussolini, Benito's granddaughter and Berlusconi's supporter, that "without Mussolini there would have been no fixed salaries, no national insurance, no rights for women . . . no great architecture and the clearing of the swamps." The Washington Post gives its readers the image of Italy almost obsessed with the ghost of Mussolini who, after a half a century, is still present in the Italian politics!



gives a hint of hope, reporting from the town of Amendolara in Calabria, a place where there is the attempt to go against the stereotype of Italy's social topography, with the efficient and prosperous north and "the south beset by poverty, mobsters and bad governance." Amendolara, like many southern resorts, has serious problems, even though "the mob holds no sway here, and the coastline has so far not been marred by ugly construction projects. This quiet town both defies and embodies the deepest problems of the south — and of Italy as a whole. And it is places like Amendolara, neither blazing northern successes nor clichéd horrors of the south, that are most likely to chart the country's future." According to Israely, "the race between former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi and former Rome Mayor Walter Veltroni comes at one of the lowest moments in post-war Italian history. With the country locked in a vicious cycle of public cynicism and economic malaise, the election does not bode well. Many pundits think the best-case scenario might be a failure by both Berlusconi and Veltroni to win a ruling majority — an outcome that would lead to the formation of a caretaker grand coalition. It is a sad day indeed for democracy when smart people start pulling for both sides to lose."

The Time article ends with a wish that is shared by most Italians who are tired of the decline of the Belpaese, highly upset with the "Casta," and hoping for a rebirth: "Italy needs more leaders willing to err in the pursuit of the public good, and citizens who learn to discard — and not recycle — those whose sole ambition is to cling to power."

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