



179

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ITALY'S LEFT LOSES POPULARITY CONTEST AGAIN¹

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It's not every day that *Corriere della Sera*, the historic mouthpiece of Italian capitalism, quotes Mao Zedong. On Monday, sensing the chaotic scenario that now transpires from the official results of Italy's general election, one of their leader writers recalled, in a tone of trepidation, the famous dictum: "Great disorder under heaven; the situation is excellent".

The day after, the disorder is plain for all to see. And there are two men for whom the situation is indeed excellent. Berlusconi bounced back improbably by stressing his key message, now retooled for times of austerity: contempt for any attempt on behalf of law or state to curb acquisitive individualism. The usual veiled apologies for tax evasion were accompanied this time around by a declaration, following the scandal around kickbacks for the sale of helicopters to India, that Italian businessmen should bribe officials of "incomplete democracies". The great gambit of his campaign had been to offer Italian voters a rebate on the unpopular IMU house tax passed by Mario Monti's government.

Once again, Berlusconi played what psychoanalysis refers to as the "obscene father", the one who encourages you to flout the law and enjoy yourself without any regard for consequences. Berlusconi's riposte to Monti's prescription for austerity was a rhetoric of licence, embracing rather than disguising the very persona that makes him such an object of disgust abroad: the misogynist, corrupt CEO. The notable gap between projected and actual votes for Berlusconi hints at the residual social shame in identifying with this particular type of authority figure.

The undisputed victor is of course Beppe Grillo, leader and sole brand owner of the Five Star Movement, which has risen to become the biggest party in the Italian parliament, after only three and a half years in existence. Obscenity is a core weapon in Grillo's arsenal – this is the man who once called the Nobel prize scientist Rita Levi-Montalcini an "old whore", and organised a mass meeting under the banner of "Fuck off Day". For all the differences in their politics, the parallels in style between Berlusconi and Grillo have been remarked on by many: above

1. An earlier version of this op-ed has been published by: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2013/feb/27/italy-left-loses-popularity-contest>

all, they both perform an extremely personalised form of politics, in which crass sound bites abound.

But the grotesque enigma that is this Italian election should perhaps be approached from the opposite direction: how did Pierluigi Bersani's coalition, built around the centre-left Partito Democratico (PD), manage to lose an election after what seemed to be the terminal decline of Berlusconi?

Three interlinked explanations offer themselves: the euro; unemployment; and the public rallies. Adding together Grillo and Berlusconi's votes, more than half of Italians voted against remaining in the common currency, or at the very least, for a referendum. Initially greeted with relief, as a kind of bourgeois dictator – in the ancient Roman sense of a ruler for a finite time of emergency – Monti revealed himself as the bearer of a project of "reforms", of which the sole possible benefit was staving off the growing spread between Italian and German bond valuations, and the fiscal wrath of Berlin and Brussels.

The PD's highly ambivalent position towards the entire European austerity programme – presenting Monti as a necessary evil at first, then intermittently criticising him from the left – was complicated by the absence of a strategy for dealing with mass unemployment, especially among the young. It meant that the PD was incapable of channelling any of the anxiety and anger that Grillo's eclectic programme tapped into.

Ever since the demise of the Italian Communist party in the early 90s, the protracted stillbirth of a social democratic party has taken place under the mission statement of turning Italy into a "normal country" (the slogan of the PD's predecessor party). But what does "normal" mean amid the ongoing crisis in which most Italians recognise that there is no "economic miracle" in the offing?

Devoid of either political passion or political programme, the Democratic party has depended on a relatively loyal core of voters scared into the voting booth by Berlusconi but incapable of real enthusiasm for a party that is capable of simultaneously praising Sergio Marchionne's brutal restructuring of Fiat and declaring itself the party of labour.

Plagued by an ideological inferiority complex to liberalism, and unable to define anything resembling a reformist alternative to Monti's regressive, hair-shirt reforms, the PD, along with the defeated rump of a non-liberal left in the [Civil Revolution list](#), has also left mass mobilisation to Grillo – as well as a number of the issues he's incoherently strung together, from ecology to the social wage.

The city squares filled by Grillo's supporters are a sad reminder of the truly popular response to the crisis in Spain and Greece. They are the symptom or negative image of the so-called left's incapacity, in its long-term desire for governmental respectability, to mobilise public energies and collective action. One should always beware of the anti-political slogan "neither left nor right", which is key to Grillo's movement. But unlike a right that can do very well with an atomised, resentful electorate, a left without mass politics is not deserving of the name.