

Perhaps, the nearly three dozens of foreign citizens—British, Canadian, American, Icelandic, German, Mexican, Taiwanese and Scandinavian—who asked me this question were simply devoid of the knowledge, the economic interests, the political background, or the spiritual attitudes that have led millions of Italians to choose Berlusconi as their national leader and international representative. On the contrary, far from being a neutral question, all of these inquisitive foreign citizens displayed invariantly their genuine astonishment at Berlusconi's electoral success, for they were unable to perceive in his public *persona* anything positive or appealing.

Most commonly, their negative perception of Berlusconi was associated with sad, stereotypical notions about Italy and the Italians, such as being lecherously over-sexed, endemically corrupt, and in bed with the Mafia. Sometimes, however, their negative perception was more sophisticated. In particular, there appeared to be recurrent concerns that billionaires or media moguls *à la* Berlusconi could establish new parties and seize self-servingly the democratic processes of their own native countries. In this perspective, my interlocutors seemed worried that some sort of “Berlusconism” could cross Italy's boundaries and take over the rest of Europe, analogously to the historical experience of fascism, which emerged in Italy and was later adopted in as different countries as Portugal and Germany.

Giulio Santagata's new book offers a different answer to this frequent, value-laden question that I was put so often over the past fifteen years. It does so by recounting with great analytical skill, vivid personal participation and significant intellectual honesty his own experience as Romano Prodi's “right hand” over the past two decades of Italian political life—Romano Prodi being the one and only left-wing candidate to ever beat, twice, Silvio Berlusconi in Italy's general elections.

The book comprises three sections, which are devoted respectively to: the history of the political alliance called “the Olive tree” (13-46); Santagata's organisation of numerous electoral campaigns (49-87); and Romano Prodi's two short-lived governments (91-146). Together, these three sections reveal the inner frailty and the limited outreach of the political coalition that supported Prodi's candidacy and governments.

The main factor at play with regard to the coalition's inner frailty would appear to have

been the sheer number and variability of the political parties that formed it. Many, short-lived, endlessly reinventing themselves in search for an invariably evanescent appeal, these parties shared a common fear and a common fault. First of all, they were all afraid of a strong leadership, whether Prodi's or anyone else's. Secondly, they regarded each other not much as allies, but as competitors. Eventually, the need for visibility of so many parties and party leaders worked against Romano Prodi, given that his alleged supporters were busier attacking each other than striking jointly at Berlusconi and at his right-wing agenda.

The limited outreach of the same parties was due *in primis* to the limited resources and media connections available to them. In this respect, Berlusconi's being a media mogul and billionaire running for office who, more or less manifestly, told newspapers and TV broadcasters what to say, did make a difference. Still, the obstinately self-referential aims of left-wing professional politicians does strike Santagata as equally relevant, for these quarrelsome political leaders claimed incessantly to know better than their own voters, who clearly liked the notion of a unified Italian left. Inevitably, such better-knowing strategists were shown to be tragically out of touch with their potential voters' hopes and demands.

It must be realised that some of the hopes and demands of the Italian voters were likely to be the result of cunningly induced dreams and fears, which right-wing politicians were better able to exploit. After all, these politicians had contributed decisively to give shape to them, thanks to Berlusconi's tight grip on Italy's mass media. Similarly, some hopes and demands were clearly the expression of the vocal plethora of small- and medium-scale interest groups that Prodi's government was trying to overcome in the name of liberal "modernity" and ever-useful "national interest". Others could be even the desiderata of Italy's organised crime and endemic corruption—sad stereotypes are not necessarily off the mark all the time.

Yet, a third element should be considered as well. Santagata hints at it in the final section of the book, in which he discusses the disastrous effects of the ongoing global economic crisis. The recipes that were proposed in the fifteen years of Prodi's political career were very much in tune with those of, say, Britain's New Labour or Germany's social-democrats. Prodi's governments were eager to liberalise the economy, privatise what little was left of public banks and State-owned industrial concerns, and, to a significant extent, ride the wave of rampant financial activities. Like Blair and Schroeder, Prodi was willing to embrace

globalisation as a positive force. In this economic perspective, the difference between his novel “post-communist” left and Berlusconi’s right was not so pronounced.

On the contrary, the only voices to criticise left-wing liberalisations, privatisations and the embrace of globalisation were a handful of so-called “radicals” on the left of Prodi’s left, and even fewer old-fashioned nationalists on the right. Everybody else, the “moderate” and “right-thinking” majority, had taken aboard the “univocally liberal and free-market thought” that had once characterised staunchly right-wing politicians such as Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan (144).

In brief, a monolithic faith in the correctness of free trade and free-market economics was established in Italy too, both left and right of the political spectrum, soon after the collapse of the USSR. Certainly, there were the few exceptions noted above, but they were marginalised as a nostalgic leftover of the Cold War era. The seventy-year-old Soviet alternative to liberal capitalism had been proven utopian by the collapse of the Eastern bloc and, with it, any serious challenge to free trade and free-market economics. As a result, liberal capitalism was glorified not solely as the only path ahead, but also as the right one, as though the failure of the Soviet remedy meant that there had never been any pathology to begin with. Yet, after twenty years of “moderate” and “right-thinking” Thatcherism, the global economy entered in 2008 such a dramatic global crisis that even Berlusconi’s own minister of financial affairs was heard calling for “more public intervention” in the economy and “the unspeakable communist word ‘nationalisation’.” (144)

Possibly, as Santagata suggests, the result of this global crisis is that the left will stop being ashamed of its traditional socialist lexicon and reformist aims, thus rediscovering “ethics, equality, welfare, labour, solidarity... capitalism, sustainability, redistribution of wealth.” (144) Whether Romani Prodi will be the most credible Italian political leader to be at the helm of this counter-counter-reformation, though, is far from clear.