

Italy: from politics to marketing

The representative democracy of the 1947 Constitution got corrupted, but today's direct democracy is worse. Leonardo Servadio writes from Milan.

During the past several months, Italian political life has undergone a significant change. The country, which according to its Constitution should still be a "representative democracy," i.e., a regime where the people exert power by means of a series of delegated structures and organizations, is passing over to so-called direct democracy, i.e., where people express their will directly on every issue.

In his *Republic*, Plato argued that too much freedom kills democracy. Now in Italy, we are likely confronting the fact that too much democracy kills freedom.

The fundamental element which served the cause of "representative democracy" from the postwar period until 1992-93, was the party structures. Italy was the "democracy of the parties." They determined all the legislation, and chose all the local and national state bureaucracies. The division of bureaucratic posts according to the differing weights of the various parties was catalogued in the "Cencelli manual" (named after the Christian Democrat who formulated it), which permitted the former ruling party, the Christian Democracy (DC), to distribute important posts to all the parties with seats in Parliament, maintaining a de facto overall peace and cooperation among them.

But that party system was killed: by the enormous state debt (now, at 2 trillion liras, higher than the Gross Domestic Product), by scandals which reduced the political life of the First Republic to shambles, and by the 1993 referendum which established that the electoral vote would be majority-based, and no longer proportional (before, each party got as many elected representatives as its percentage of the vote; now, it's winner-take-all).

With the government of television magnate Silvio Berlusconi (April-December 1994), the first after the referendum, and the first after the death of the First Republic, it was proclaimed loud and clear by the mass media that "direct democracy" had arisen. It was most appropriate that the television czar would be its midwife. Berlusconi apparently lives by the polls. All his decisions are preceded by a poll, and only if the poll is favorable is the decision taken.

Notoriously, the private television networks live off commercials. And commercials need polls in order to establish

the prices of the various "time slots" and to evaluate the real "market share," and thereby the real "value," of each broadcast. As a private television magnate, Berlusconi was so used to polls that when he entered the political arena, he introduced that conceptual revolution into politics. Before announcing his program, he polled the public to see what it wanted. Then, he announced it as his program—as easy as selling a five-second prime time spot with a 10% discount on the nominal value.

The Italians wanted jobs. So, he promised jobs and won. At his side, Berlusconi kept his polling "genius," Gianni Pilo, a professional pollster. During Berlusconi's government the poll mania spread like wildfire, and the former Communists, now PDS, started to do the same, commissioning polls at the drop of a hat. Political round tables were organized daily to debate the issues emerging out of the polls.

The most successful communist television broadcast, a political debate led by journalist Michele Santoro, is organized around a continuous poll. Say the subject is, "Is the right wing properly represented in the mass media?" The panel is made up of various "personalities," the editors of the country's major newspapers plus some television journalists. Every five minutes the camera pans a room where young women are taking calls from the public. The public is called upon to answer the question: "Is Berlusconi's power in the national television networks too dangerous?" Every five minutes a nice lady informs the public, "Now 53.2% of Italians think that it is not dangerous, 41.7% think it is, and 5.1% do not know." Then all the "experts" debate. After five minutes the program is interrupted again and the new "results" of the poll are made known. Maybe a total of 25 people call in to answer the stupid question. Yet the poll is presented as "the thinking of the Italian people."

The major dailies, such as *Corriere della Sera*, constantly run polls. "Public opinion expert" Renato Mannheimer polls voters on their intentions. Over the course of weeks Mannheimer thus shows that voters increasingly vote less for the Popular Party (PP, the old Christian Democracy). He wants to show that with the new majority-based system, people want to be either right or left, and that no center of the

political spectrum is possible any more. The fact that one paper presents as the objective thinking of the majority of Italians, that the PP should not exist, is a much stronger argument than a hundred speeches by politicians.

But far from being an amusing little ruse, with the Berlusconi government, polls became the daily bread of all the national mass media. Political platforms became increasingly associated with the media, rather than with the parties. The “right-wing” option is presented by the daily *Il Giornale* and the weekly *Il Settimanale* and its editors Vittorio Feltri and Marcello Veneziani, and the journalists of Berlusconi’s television empire. The “left-wing” option has been reborn in the classic British free-trade mold, having found its standard-bearer in Indro Montanelli, the former editor of *Il Giornale* (which he founded as an anti-communist daily!) and now editor of the liberal *La Voce*; in short, journalists are taking over the politicians’ role of speaking to the people to formulate and discuss ideas and programs.

The cycle is obvious. The mass media formulate the thinking process, which is then poured into “public opinion,” where it is “monitored” by the polls, whose results become binding on the elected officials. This mechanism guarantees that whoever controls the media controls the elected representatives, with “public opinion” as the apparent source of legitimacy. Politicians are reduced to technicians at the behest of the opinion poll/media magnates.

Not by chance, the issue most hotly debated during the first Berlusconi government was the question of the control of the state television.

The referendum merry-go-round

But it is not only polls that constitute the backbone of direct democracy. Referendums are also important. Here the master is former Liberal student leader Giacinto Pannella, now a Radical leader of an electoral slate in his own name. In recent months, this referendum enthusiast proposed a total of 10, of which six were declared unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court, and the other four will be voted on next spring, together with referendums introduced by different organizations. Pannella’s all go in the direction of deregulation of public television, of labor/management relations, and of business activities. Among those which were struck down was one calling for deregulating welfare assistance.

Is there a strategy behind all this shift to “direct democracy”? Yes, and a longstanding one.

In 1977, a book was published called *La costituzione di carta* (*The Paper Constitution*), by Mario D’Antonio. D’Antonio headed the study center of the Chamber of Deputies (the lower house) for several years, and in 1977 he was the top researcher for the Institute for Documentation and Legislation Studies and a prolific writer on constitutional subjects—in short, a real “insider” in the state bureaucracy. The book’s contention was that, since the Italian Republic’s Constitution was written in 1947, its basic plan for the func-

tioning of the state and government has been progressively emptied and inverted in real political life. The argument is persuasively documented.

D’Antonio shows that from the outset, the various parties, ignoring the constitutional dictates on separation of powers, have taken over the institutions of government and used them to private advantage, dealing with them as private property. At the same time, within the parties themselves, oligarchies prevailed, increasingly stifling policy debate. Hence the national institutions were permanently occupied by the oligarchies in control of the parties. The parties, in turn, lived by corruption. Exploiting their power, they took money illegally from banks, industries, and other sources, in exchange for political favors: a sort of secret illegal tax system imposed over the economic entities. Anyone who wanted a career in public institutions had to be “protected” by a party, and in a country where the public sector accounted for half the economy, this meant a lot.

D’Antonio shows that the corruption started before the Constitution was even written, in the mid-1940s, and continued into the 1970s. The book argues that the constitutional provisions have been so twisted that there is no way to return to a situation where the constitution might really be implemented. Therefore, power should be taken away from the parties and direct democracy installed, taking advantage of the use of computers—D’Antonio implies something like a system of permanent popular consultation. Finally, he concludes, government must no longer be run by politicians but by ordinary citizens, chosen for limited periods by random drawing.

As D’Antonio emphasizes, precisely in the mid-1970s, when he was writing the book, the state television monopoly was broken with the creation of private television (resulting in the hegemony of Berlusconi’s networks in the private sector); and the just-established public financing of the parties proved unable to stop the existing cycle of corruption.

The book proves that the present Italian political crisis had been planned out nearly 20 years ago, at a time when the attack by the terrorist Red Brigades and various “autonomous” and “right-wing” groups against the Christian Democracy-centered party system was at its zenith. Far from being a fringe operation, the attack against the state came from within the state itself. Moreover, while hard evidence is not at hand, it can only be suspected that it had ample aid from the foreign interests which have never hesitated to meddle in Italian politics.

The party system was undoubtedly corrupt. The question now is not whether the new gamemasters of mass-media politics are more, or less corrupt. In the interstices of the mass-based political parties, there were also people who represented the real interests of Italy as a nation. In the bureaucratic organizations which control the mass media today, one can hardly see anything but the private interests of an ever smaller, ever more powerful oligarchy.