

Review 2

Title: 'Silvio Berlusconi: Television, Power and Patrimony'. By Paul Ginsborg. London: Verso, 2005, 195 p. ISBN 978-7-84467-541-8.

Reviewed by: Marie Demaerel, University of Antwerp, Belgium.

Paul Ginsborg, a distinguished author on historic and contemporary Italy, has researched the influence of Silvio Berlusconi's policy and media oligopoly. In his book he contemplates around what he considers a central issue in a modern world: does Berlusconi's model of media and political power announce a new model of political control in modern democracy?

Ginsborg starts his book with a brief sketch of the building blocks that Berlusconi used to create his empire. In the making of a television empire he points out that there was a window of opportunity for Berlusconi. The absence of commercial television made it possible to develop his own media channel where advertising reigns. In a society where 86.3 percent of the inhabitants watch television daily with a viewing time of 3h50, Italy is almost an ideal consumer of advertisement. So almost under control of only one single individual, television and print media became the prime cultural conditioning for a period of twenty years. A connection to the eventual political triumph is fundamental to consider.

The medium is not safe in the hands of Berlusconi according to Ginsborg. Maurizio Costanzo illustrates this colourfully: "Power does not belong to those who talk on television. It belongs to those who permit you to talk on television." The practice of media oligopoly is completely against the separation of power and democratic values, this is noticeable in the obscure circumstances and outcomes of law creation.

Berlusconi's electoral success can be explained by the persona cult that was created around his appearance. Being a charismatic person by nature, Berlusconi applies the American model of personalizing politics onto his policy and actions. Add the combination of patronage and a condottiere tradition (considering a person as victorious and wanting to put them on a pedestal), his successful business career that brought him prosperity, populist elements in his self-presentation, unlimited ambition and ownership, a weakened rule of power, and you end up with a cocktail that puts the attention on one single figure which is entirely new in the history of the Italian republic.

In the quite extensively clarification I personally miss an angle of incidence considering a cultural element, namely the macho/alpha-male culture. Generally presumed that Italy's public sphere is dominated by male politicians, this can be an alternative, or better said a supplementary explanation for the high ratio of female voters to the explanations of his 'sex-appeal' and advertising bombings directed at housewives.

Ginsborg argues that the comparison with Mussolini caution is obligatory, 'for what strikes the historian immediately are the differences rather than the similarities between

the two cases.’ The biggest difference between the two is the fact that it is rather difficult to call Mussolini a patrimonial figure. The personality of Mussolini fits more closely a Weberian idea of a charismatic figure than Berlusconi.

Ginsborg considers the (few) obstacles Berlusconi is dealing with, as they create an atmosphere where resistance from all angles can expound. A spluttering economy appears to be a major problem, for it shows a lack of a coherent economic strategy from the government. Also the issue of the police force and their conflicts of interests are found to be a difficult affair, together with the statute that Italy adapts within the European Union. Finally the outspokenly rich cultural history must be included in policy making, which proves to be challenging with the wind of privatization blowing through Italy. Essentially and concrete it translates in the poor image of Berlusconi’s government that can be explained by ‘overpromising’ towards the voters, the poor quality of his team and the downturn in the economy.

To conclude the summary with Ginsborgs’ own words: “Berlusconi will probably fail [...]. But the political and cultural trends of which he is one of the most striking expressions are here to stay, and they weigh heavily upon our collective dramatic future”. All through the book Ginsborg offers a good insight on Italian politics, especially for people who aren’t directly specialized in the matter. In a comfortable, easy-read and informative style he presents the contemporary issues that Italy has to cope with, without being too scientifically or incomprehensible. A combination of a historical narrative and a precautionary analysis of Berlusconi’s characteristics and national developments results in a work where the particular issues and problems of Italy can be transposed to an international and universal level.

References

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