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Italian Populism and the Trajectories of Two Leaders: Silvio Berlusconi and Umberto Bossi

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In November 2011, Silvio Berlusconi resigned as Prime Minister of Italy. A few months earlier he had resigned as head of the *Popolo della Libertà* party (People of Freedom) – the leading partner in the right-wing coalition that had ruled Italy for most of the previous 15 years. These resignations marked a pause in the political career of one of the most visible and controversial leaders of Italian politics in recent years, whom several observers have characterized as a ‘populist’ (Meny & Surel 2002, Edwards 2005, Albertazzi & McDonnell 2008, Pasquino 2008, Ruzza & Fella 2011). Berlusconi’s two resignations took place as Italy was sliding towards economic disaster, with a collapsing stock market and a crisis of confidence in the ability of the Italian state to service its large and mounting public debt. Following this resignation a new government of university professors and bankers briefly replaced Berlusconi and implemented a programme of financial austerity.

While most political parties supported this programme, including, although reluctantly, Berlusconi’s party, the other notable ‘populist’ charismatic figure and Berlusconi’s long-standing ally – Umberto Bossi, leader of the separatist party ‘The Northern League’ – reacted with a new wave of oratorical radicalism and theatrical actions in Parliament, reversing his previously more sedate pro-government stance. Thus the two former allies manifested different and incompatible views.

The deepening of the financial crisis unsettled the populist political axis which had characterized Italian politics in recent decades. The centre-right coalition that ruled Italy in recent years had now lost its unity and a great deal of public support. However, through its leader and his vast financial empire, it retains control of much of the Italian media and enjoys continuing approval from large sections of the Italian social and political élites. Accordingly, now is a good time to reflect on the long-term legacy of this axis – and on the sociological consequences and impact on Italian society. We will argue that these consequences are even more important than the political ones, which many observers agree have been momentous, providing Italy with a new electoral

law, a distinctive and different political culture and a set of new political parties. The social consequences are equally important, however. In the view of observers such as Albertazzi, Mazzoleni and Zaslove, these two leaders and their parties 'colonized' society with their values, their styles of communication, their strongly polarized views of enemies and friends, the personal qualities that they value and those that they condemn (Mazzoleni 2008, Zaslove 2008, Albertazzi & Rothenberg 2009) – a 'syndrome' often referred to as the 'Berlusconization' of Italy (Ginsborg 2004, Albertazzi & Rothenberg 2009: 8, Ginsborg & Asquer 2011). By reviewing the political trajectories of these two leaders, we shall seek to assess the impact of their ideas on Italian society. We also believe that reflecting on these two leaders, their strategies and the political opportunities that they exploited will also allow more general lessons to be drawn for Europe, where manifestations of populism are widespread. Although their impact is by no means historically concluded, enough evidence has now accumulated for more general reflection to be possible. We shall not provide an historical account of recent Italian political history, this is available from other sources (Ginsborg 2001, Bull & Newell 2005, Donovan & Onofri 2008). We shall instead concentrate on the sociological relevance of the visions and political communication of these two leaders.

It should be emphasized that Berlusconi's resignation has certainly not put an end to his long political career, but it nonetheless marks a momentous change in Italian politics. It signals the conclusion of a period which has been described as being characterized by the emergence and affirmation of populist politics to an extent possibly unique in contemporary European politics, albeit not unique to Italy (Ginsborg 2001, Tarchi 2008). The Italian case has been seen as epitomizing a more general European context in which complex dynamics have interacted to produce distinctive political alignments whose sociological counterpart is an equally distinctive configuration. We refer to dynamics such as the personalization of politics, the normalization of forms of 'hard' and 'soft' populism in civil society, the concentration of media ownership under the control of tycoons who have used it to advance their right-wing political views, the emergence of racism and xenophobia in the context of various types of 'enemy politics' and the growing legitimization of a right-wing political agenda across the public policy landscape (Mudde 2007). Equally important are mounting forms of anti-political reliance on charismatic leaders to remedy the perceived shortcomings of democratic institutions (Betz 1994). More generally, this has been a long period of triumph for the ideology of unfettered markets and retrenchment of the State – a period of affirmation for the ideologies of New Public Management in the public sector and glorification of deregulation in the private sector, an emerging ethos which has also notably characterized Italy (Kicker 2007). However, it has also been a period in which a clash has often been noted between the public affirmation of these pro-market ideologies and a concomitant, much slower implementation of liberalizing economic change. This has sometimes been labelled a triumph of style over substance, and in this regard populism has been seen as a political style, rather than as a coherent ideology or set of policies (Mair 2002, Taggart 2002).

In the Italian context, this process has sometimes been referred to as the 'Berlusconization' of Italy, with reference to both the glorification of markets and the 'politics of announcements' – a politics of style over substance, of declarations of principles over the implementation of policies. Similar phenomena have, however, been

noted in other countries. The connections between them have not escaped analysts, and they are typically reflected in publications with titles such as *Le Sarkoberlusconisme* (Musso 2008).

Thus the financial crisis of 2008 and its long aftermath come at the conclusion of a long cycle of both neo-liberal and populist politics which has seen the affirmation and sometimes decline of populist European leaders. Although some have declined or died and some are still exerting political impact, over the years, a long list of influential populist political leaders has emerged. They have included well-known politicians such as Jörg Haider, Jean Marie Le Pen, Pim Fortuyn and the Kaczyński brothers. The rise of recent Italian populism in Italy began with Berlusconi's outstanding electoral success in 1994, amid promises of economic liberalization, meritocracy, efficiency and, above all, empowerment of 'the people', whom Berlusconi purported to represent directly, in contrast to the previous corrupt political élites that had ruled Italy during the post-war period (Poli 2001). Large sections of the Italian population accepted this recipe and shaped their identities accordingly. The victory of Berlusconi coincided with the birth of 'the Second Italian Republic' and the demise of an entire party system dominated by the Italian Christian Democratic Party, which disappeared after its involvement in a series of corruption trials. The early 1990s were therefore not only a period of political renewal, of which Berlusconi was seen as the main initiator, but also a period of social renewal, and carried hopes for a better society.

To gain a full understanding of the importance of this fact, one should follow Pierre Bourdieu's advice 'to try and think politics sociologically' (Bourdieu 2001). Hence, we shall seek to reconceptualize populism 'sociologically' by directing attention to the interrelated aspects of political and social change that it activates.

However, we argue that merely reporting a 'Berlusconization' of Italian society is not sufficient. This process must be framed in a broader context of mounting populist sentiments and of multiple, and even possibly incompatible, populisms (Tarchi 2002, 2008). A necessary first step is to conduct a parallel analysis of two populist figures, Berlusconi and Bossi. Both are 'winners' in the Italian political competition; both are charismatic leaders, both are deeply connected to their *popolo* (we shall use Italian *popolo* as it is a word reminiscent of the fascist rhetoric of an internally undifferentiated and externally exclusionary entity). And both of them are evidently important actors within a right-wing populist framework. But their 'stories' are very different.

We shall compare their public images and their political programmes and argue that their definition of *il popolo* is key to both. They embrace a vision of *il popolo* which requires and legitimizes an anti-immigration political discourse, xenophobic attitudes and language. Both Berlusconi and Bossi, with some differences, have contributed to disseminating exclusionary forms of public discourse which are now widely accepted, taken for granted by the public and recurrent in everyday language and practices.

Populism in Italy

The theme of Italian populism has been examined by historians, philosophers and political scientists, and it is central to ongoing debates (McDonnell 2006, Mastropaolo 2008, Tarchi 2008, Ruzza & Fella 2011). It would be difficult to summarize the relevant

contributions adequately. Suffice it to say that, in the Italian context, the complex and historically late process of 'becoming a nation' has produced a recurring 'populist temptation'. Fascism was, of course, a long dramatic experience in Italian 'populism'. A nation divided by large geographical, cultural and even linguistic barriers attempted to reconstruct its identity with reference to ideologies concerning an invented and glorified historical heritage, enforced internal homogeneity and belligerent attitudes to invented threats (Berezin 1999). However, different visions of the nation, its enemies and its aspirations repeatedly clashed, and redefinitions were imposed by the outcomes of those clashes. An endeavour to redefine *il popolo* ensued from the defeat of fascism.

Over time, new attempts to redefine *il popolo* were prompted by the unsuitability of other ideologies that developed and then at least partially waned, such as visions of a re-Christianization of Italy, or of a socialist society. The late 1980s and early 1990s – the period of inception of the current populist right – were in this sense a crucial period of ideological collapse and renewed collective identity foundation (Cartocci 1996). The collapse of the Eastern Bloc and processes of secularization called for new visions of *il popolo*. Two such visions were embodied by Berlusconi and Bossi (*ibid.*).

Berlusconi and the 'people of freedom' (*popolo della libert*)

Silvio Berlusconi has for years represented the ideal of the successful businessman, the very wealthy, very active and very 'modern' embodiment of the American model of success based on a 'work hard, play hard' lifestyle. This cultural icon has been embodied by his lifestyle, and it has been popularized by his media empire. With Berlusconi, post-war Italian national television, controlled by the Christian Democrats and intended as an instrument of mass literacy, popular education and indoctrination into the Christian values of charity and frugality, has been replaced by television centred on entertainment and portraying a world of scantily dressed women and affluent lifestyles. Once Berlusconi was in government, a combination of influence, through political control of public television channels and nearly total control of private television channels, cemented his impact on Italian culture and society (Andrews 2005, Edwards 2005, Pasquino 2007).

Through personal direct forms of communication, Berlusconi introduced a new model of political leadership onto the public stage – a model very different from the traditional one. The old model was based on long convoluted speeches by bland politicians using a set of complex metaphors only fully understandable to political insiders (Amadori 2002, Mazzoleni 2008). Berlusconi's political communication relies instead on the frequent use of jokes – often 'politically incorrect' ones – in which his adversaries are derided. He offers musical performances to the audience; he sings, makes joking references to aspects of his private life, including ones to his wealth and his body, his illnesses, hair transplants, cosmetic surgery and height (Mazzoleni 2008). Thus this is a 'personalization' of politics, which also alludes to a redefinition of the individual as a modern consumer – a powerful consumer of beauty treatments and quality clothes, with an affluent lifestyle. By means of his irreverence and flaunted wealth, Berlusconi takes the personalization of politics a step further than other politicians. He embodies

the aspirations and qualities of *il popolo* that he claims to represent – the Westernized affluent consumer, the entrepreneur who despises politics and politicians. He claims that he engages in the discredited profession of politics purely for the sake of ‘his people’, not because he needs to, and not for career purposes. He claims that he is only ‘lending’ his entrepreneurial skills temporarily to an otherwise discredited occupation: that of the professional politician. And his is a people who idealize him precisely because of his unusual style, unprofessional behaviour and humorous remarks.

An emotional identification with their leader creates a symbolic bridge for voters – a connection between his charisma and their needs and hopes – bypassing the corrupt intermediating élites, the professional profiteers of the political world that Berlusconi despises. Thus in Berlusconi’s case, the ‘personalization of politics’ is achieved through public performance which symbolizes anti-élitism but also hedonism and success, and which then justifies public political power through private social and economic power. In the words of his voters, ‘he is so rich he does not need to steal’ and ‘he has been so successful as an entrepreneur, he can only be good for Italy’ and also ‘he will protect our economic interests in the financial world and in the business world because they are his own economic interests as well’. Messages of this kind are collected in a book of letters from his supporters that Berlusconi published in 2010 (Berlusconi 2010).

Anchoring his political spectacle to his body enables Berlusconi to claim a ‘real’ existence – a personal and emotional relevance that goes beyond what he often calls ‘the theatre of politics’. In December 2009, he was attacked in Milan by a mentally unstable bystander who hit him in the face with a pointed object. Revealingly, he chose to be pictured and televised immediately afterwards, showing his wounds. His bloodied face thus attested to his ‘real existence’. It cemented his connection with real people and negated his membership of unreachable social élites. It was also part of another spectacle. His wounded body echoed the stories of martyrdom and altruistic sacrifice so close to Catholic culture. It was suggested that he appeared to be undergoing a collective process of beatification (Ceri 2011).

This claimed self-sacrifice is naturally derided by Berlusconi’s detractors, but among his supporters it has been accompanied by a rhetoric which vilifies all political enemies, typically described as morally unsound, unappreciative and prejudiced. This has resulted in a strong polarization of political views. Observers have noted that this climate has been conducive to Berlusconi’s communication strategies, which are based on moralized anti-communist stances. Connections between the horrors of Soviet communist persecutions and his enemies are used as standard rhetorical devices in his speeches. Conversely, he portrays himself and his *popolo* as loving and caring – as affluent and happy, and therefore not full of the envy and hatred typical of losers in the capitalist economic competition. The title of the book previously mentioned, which collected the views of Berlusconi’s supporters, conveys this view: ‘Love always wins over envy and hatred’ (Berlusconi 2010).

However, in 2008, Berlusconi’s power and influence started to unravel. A series of sexual scandals erupted at precisely the time when the Italian economic situation was deteriorating. Initially, he tried to deny or minimize accusations of sexual misconduct, and once again he reinterpreted these scandals through the filter of his public persona: that is, he utilized them to prove his own anti-political nature, his exceptionality

and therefore his membership of *il popolo* of affluent Western consumers whose hedonism allows occasional minor transgressions. Berlusconi's sexual misconduct was reinterpreted through a public performance consisting of jokes, denials and reinterpretations of events by his media, himself and his political allies. He reiterated his optimism, denying the seriousness of the financial crisis emerging throughout Europe and in Italy in particular.¹

However, as the crisis began to affect the lifestyles of his constituents, Berlusconi gradually appeared to be the highly privileged member of an élite. His private vices started to be framed in public opinion as a logical extension of his conflict of interests, whereby he could do things precluded to others with the means at his disposal. It was only at this stage that the self-serving policies promoted by a Parliament that he effectively controlled became gradually less accepted, and in 2011 his electoral support started to wane (Ginsborg & Asquer 2011, Salvati 2012).

Umberto Bossi and the Northern League

The success of Berlusconi over such a long period would not have been possible without the protracted support of an ethno-nationalist party with roots in the affluent north. Umberto Bossi and his party, the Northern League, attracted national attention as a new phenomenon in the late 1980s, at a time when the 'new social movements' of the left-liberal family were beginning to decline. The 'Lega Nord' (The League – initially a smaller movement called the Lombard League) was, at the outset, generally seen as an eccentric and politically irrelevant formation. The League exhibited a distinctive repertoire of ethno-nationalist rituals (Albertazzi & McDonnell 2005, Huysseune 2006), which included the adoption of medieval costumes claimed to be typical of the northern Italian regions in medieval times, and advocated the use of local dialects. These traits were meant to reclaim the legitimacy of local traditions, and they were generally regarded as inappropriate by an Italian cultural establishment still grappling with both state-building and nation-building strategies. The cultural unification of Italy was a goal still widely accepted by all the social classes and political ideologies dominant at the time of the League's ascendancy.

The League also manifested an openly anti-intellectual ethos, which included the adoption of simple and immediate language in political speeches, a refusal to legitimate and empower intellectuals among cadres and the rejection of the cosmopolitan ethos that marked the culture of educated Italian élites. The League's political discourse was thus strongly anti-political and anti-élitist from the outset (Ruzza & Schmidtke 1993, Cento Bull & Gilbert 2001, Gomez-Reino Cachafeiro 2001).

Umberto Bossi – the charismatic leader of this formation – epitomized cultural values and a political style which, at the time, appeared novel in their anti-modern ethos and unashamedly localist character. In contrast to Berlusconi, Bossi came from a small village, and from a culturally and economically modest background (Tambini 1993).

¹ For instance Christine Lagarde, noted: 'To have had him say at a press conference that there was no crisis in Italy because the restaurants were full, the planes were booked ... where was he?' (cited in *Newsweek*, 30 January 2012, 35).

He remained proudly attached to his origins and village. His political vision was one of a society radically different from Berlusconi's – a society of small producers rooted in strong morals and families, and grounded in strong communities. This vision, however, also attracted popular support and over the years became increasingly characterized in exclusionary ethno-nationalist terms, with open and recurrent xenophobic overtones and an increasing social conservatism.

Bossi therefore embodied a different vision of *il popolo* – not modern consumers but village dwellers. His vision appealed to a different audience, and it represented a powerful ideological alternative to the dominant ideologies of the post-war period – an ideology, at the time, as new and persuasive as Berlusconi's recipe for self-affirmation and personal freedom through consumerism. For instance, Berlusconi has referred to his hair transplants as a means to construct a better image and therefore enjoy a better life. For Bossi however, self-affirmation was a collective communal pursuit within which strong solidarities had to be cemented, with the exclusion of those who did not belong to the community – initially Italian southern workers, and then migrants.

In 2004 Bossi fell seriously ill and was forced off the public scene for a lengthy period. He returned as a deeply transformed person, an elderly man in bad physical shape but still determined to lead his party, and with a different kind of charisma – that of the great sage, the elder statesman.

Bossi had once abandoned his ally Berlusconi, leading to the collapse of the first Berlusconi government in 1994. However, after his illness, he remained a faithful ally until after Berlusconi's 2011 resignation, when Bossi once again withdrew his support for the coalition.

However, in the intervening period, he and his party remained strong allies of Berlusconi, and for over a decade they were a central component of his coalition. This was thus a coalition of two populisms – or, more precisely, a coalition of three populisms, because the third component of the centre-right coalition adopted a populist stance for a long period, although not as vehemently as the Berlusconi and Bossi formations. The third component was a party that represented the heirs of fascism – a mix of ageing, nostalgic members of pre-war fascism and younger modernizers, including the party leader, Gianfranco Fini. For them, the concept of *il popolo* was based on classic nation-building nationalism. For instance, the 1995 Statute of National Alliance – the then party of Fini – declared:

National Alliance is a political movement which has as its objective the guarantee of the spiritual dignity and the social and economic aspirations of the Italian people, in respect of their civil traditions and national unity. (Alleanza-Nazionale 1995: 1)

These heirs of fascism thus embodied an opposite vision, of a united Italy, and consequently they often conflicted with the nation-dissolving efforts of the League. Their vision of *il popolo* was grounded in a reassertion of the fascist myths of past, but they were also aware of the limited historical viability of their goals, and therefore were less able to proclaim them (Ruzza & Fella 2009). Fini's political formation changed its name over the years. In the post-war period he led the Movimento Sociale Italiano

(Italian Social Movement); then, with the incorporation of conservative Catholics and a neoliberal component, he headed Alleanza Nazionale (National Alliance), which gradually merged with Berlusconi's party, Forza Italia, to form the Popolo della Libertà. After breaking with Berlusconi, Fini left the coalition. In all these transformations the dominant ideological emphasis was always on Italian nationalism. However, after founding the new party, Futuro e Libertà, in 2011, Fini joined a centrist coalition with a large Christian component, which tempered much of his remaining populist rhetoric.

In recent years, Bossi's support became increasingly important for Berlusconi. As his personal relations with Fini gradually deteriorated, Berlusconi's political reliance on the League grew. The relation between two charismatic leaders and their two parties thus increasingly characterized Italian politics, and it can be described as the union of two populisms, and as the related and intertwined story of two contrasting, but in some areas compatible, political visions.

Berlusconi and Bossi were like-minded in their reliance on a politics of the enemy, in their anti-communism, in their sometimes implicit and sometimes explicit xenophobia – much more central for Bossi – and in their constant use of theatrical politics and a reliance on staged public events. Their anti-political stance forced them to appear as if they were not in government but in opposition, while – as their critics often argued – they nevertheless used the power and resources of office to reward and retain their electorate, and in the case of Berlusconi to steer parliamentary approval for self-serving policies (Ginsborg & Asquer 2011, Salvati 2012). Indeed, the problematic relation between public discourse and public policy has often been pointed out by analysts of Italian politics (Mastropaolo 2008).

In the meantime, however, despite its political rhetoric, the League sought to become institutionalized at local level. It learned how to administer municipalities and developed stable connections with important social and political actors, such as the Church. A new generation of local administrators emerged and learned the language and skills of public administration. They then acquired the distinctive ability to speak and operate with multiple political registers – appearing bombastic in their activist media while acting responsibly in their roles as mayors and city councillors. The League learned to rely on younger and competent administrators closely tied to their *popolo*, whose primary values were the defence and celebration of local identities and traditional culture, but who were also good at local government and efficiency. These administrators often ritualistically opposed the nation-building efforts and cosmopolitan ethos of Italian elite culture. Conversely, Berlusconi's party remained a 'plastic party', as his critics have often argued, with little or no grounding in local communities. This difference in party structure reflects the different communities of reference of the unattached cosmopolitan consumer and the small-city dweller (Mammone et al. 2008, Bar-on 2009).

However, despite examples of good governance at local level, integrating incompatible policy blueprints with other coalition partners at national level proved difficult. Even the political communication efforts of the different coalition partners remained very different and often incompatible. A comparative analysis of their electoral party manifestos shows, for instance, that they were unable to agree on fundamental values and stressed different priorities. Berlusconi's party typically emphasized economic

competitiveness, and focused on an inefficient state bureaucracy seen as hindering business efficiency, and also on personal security and family values. Fini's party typically emphasized a strong executive and law and order policies – issues stemming from its fascist roots. The Northern League focused on the regional devolution of power and rallied against state assistance to southern regions. This has been evidenced by Ruzza and Fella's content analysis of over ten years of the League's written policy texts and party manifestos (Ruzza & Fella 2009).

The only rhetorical device that enabled the coalition partners to appear united was a shared insistence on the importance of *il popolo* – a value that appeared among the ten highest priorities of all three parties (ibid.). Populism was thus a conceptual 'glue', providing the appearance of cohesion and enabling incompatible parties with incompatible visions to appear united, if not to govern effectively together.

A country of competing populism

The lifestyles, values and political trajectories of Bossi and Berlusconi can now be reconceptualized sociologically. Not only their alliance but also their recent differences and tensions indicate that populism is a complex and multifarious process – a language and a set of policy approaches that interpret the cleavages that characterize Italian social and political life. For instance, analyses of the political language of Berlusconi and Bossi have shown that Berlusconi typically uses the aspirational language of the *petite bourgeoisie*, which aims to achieve social distinction through coded references to wealth, higher education and the adoption of the language of business and finance (Amadori 2002). Conversely, Bossi uses a language of the Northern working classes – a language that one would expect to see used in pubs and which is based on hyperbole and intentional defiance of the opinions perceived to reflect the rules of 'political correctness' of the Left (Ruzza 2008).

Dreams of cosmopolitan consumer happiness coexist in the same political coalition with visions of glorified localism and exclusionary xenophobic politics, thanks to an unspecific glorification of the people where, however, different constituencies understand the people differently and are sometimes uncertain of their own definitions of friends and enemies. The electoral flows of votes between the parties of Berlusconi and Bossi suggest that the same voters often oscillated between competing visions of their *popolo* of reference (Diamanti 2003, Ruzza & Fella 2009).

We may therefore posit that Italian populism is a weak political ideology which allows for constant restatements of alliances and values (Freedman 1996). It is a language adopted by political actors to justify their fears, and to legitimate their egoistic drive. But it may also be an expression of social uncertainty – the expression of a need for a community of reference which is lacking in contemporary Italian society. It indicates the importance of a political project to rebuild communities, one that effectively bridges the gap between modernity and tradition, between individual liberty and communal reassurance, between cosmopolitanism and belonging.

Constant electoral changes in the fortunes of these populist parties indicate that although voters may sometimes support right-wing positions, they do so

only peripherally. Exclusionary stances may remain dormant and be activated by interpretations of events in the world of public communication that make an exclusionary discourse appear sensible. But the same voters may turn their backs on the populist vision, as the recent collapse of support for the right-wing coalition seems to suggest. Yet the coalition partners retain the capacity to seek, accept and legitimate populist solutions in a sort of everyday populism which relies on, by now, strongly entrenched anti-political stances and exclusionary attitudes ready to be reawakened by socially disruptive events.

We would also posit the existence of an 'everyday populism' as a syndrome that parallels 'everyday racism' (Essed 1991), which in the Italian context is characterized by a narrow and exclusionary community-defending character, but is also one in which the conceptual boundaries of the community of reference are differently defined by different political groups and their leaders. This everyday populism is predicated upon the implicit assumption of a culturally homogeneous 'people' engaged in unwanted cultural relations with an 'other people', which is seen as incompatible and different, and therefore rejected. It is then an implicit popular theory of cultural encounters of a particular type – encounters leading to polarization and a shared unwillingness to engage in meaningful forms of interaction (Delanty 2011: 644–5).

Each of the two parties' idealized communities can be cemented through enhancing inclusion or by asserting exclusionary essentialist boundaries. Each of the three parties has chosen to adopt a culturally essentialist conception of their community – their *popolo*. Berlusconi's idealized community of affluent consumers, Bossi's ethno-nationalist community, with its dialects, folklore and cultural values, and Fini's nationalist community based on historical myths of the homeland are all culturally essentialist communities. Although they are not biological, they are difficult to modify because they acquired their features through long processes which lend themselves to processes of exclusion. Each of these communities is also cemented by an emphasis on external threats, and the three leaders define their identities in opposition to these threats. Berlusconi's stereotype of the 'Communists' gripped by envy and anger points to a vision that legitimates social inequalities and excludes. The League's propaganda is Islamophobic, and it stresses religious affiliation and ethnic background as conditions for incorporation into the community. Possibly to a lesser extent, Fini's rhetoric emphasizes the threats to national cohesion raised by migrants. In this climate of cultural essentialism, a state-of-siege atmosphere has characterized Italy's political culture and permeated its society for many years. In other words, non-Italians are conceptualized as carriers of a culture that is fundamentally unchanging and incompatible with the values of Western societies.

Social intolerance and perceptions of threat have resulted in the recurrent racist attacks against minorities that have characterized Italian society in recent decades (Balbo & Manconi 1990). Examples include the destruction of Roma camps and the organized beatings of minorities. This has produced a polarization of Italian political culture between, on the one hand, racism and, on the other, an anti-racist movement occasionally able to rally strong support, notably when unjustified and violent attacks against migrants are reported in the media. However, the anti-racist movement has been more frequently concerned with educational initiatives and with providing

support to minorities in key sectors such as housing, health and the labour market (Ruzza 2008). On the other hand, 'everyday populism' remains the dominant cultural context for sizeable sections of the population.

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