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Berlusconi: Has he really gone?

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For many years now, opposition to Berlusconi's government in Italy has focused on the man himself, as a symbol of the rotten heart of Italy: the court cases, his alleged links with the mafia, ad personam legislation, sex scandals, conflicts of interest, and the slide into superficial TV culture promoted by Berlusconi's three TV stations.

Berlusconi's ubiquitous face (and body) on TV, in newspapers, on the Internet, and on billboards have come to symbolise the ever-present media mogul and politician, and the corrupting power that is percolating down from him into society. Ousting him, one would think, would free the country from his corrupting political and cultural influence, so it was precisely this that the opposition focused on: either political ousting, or the ultimate ousting: death. In the cultural sphere, as many as six novels and two films have emerged in which the most radical ousting was proposed: the death of the leader. However, in his film, Il Caimano (2006), Nanni Moretti puts his finger on the heart of the problem. Berlusconi is not an anomaly that can just be done away with. He may be a histrionic character, with his hyperbolic gaffs that the foreign press and the local Italian opposition so enjoy poking fun at, but he's a product of, and producer of, Italian society. Moretti's character in the film says, 'Berlusconi has already won! Twenty years ago, thirty years ago, with his television stations, he changed our way of thinking, do you understand?'

Therefore, despite the elation outside the Presidential Palace in Rome as Berlusconi tendered his resignation, Berlusconi hasn't gone. The following morning, the front page of Berlusconi-owned paper, Il giornale, sported a statesman-like photograph of Berlusconi and a headline 'Monti: Il precario', 'precarious' being the word Italians use for those to have the misfortune of a temporary and unstable job. The newspaper manages to make Berlusconi look like the permanent one despite having lost his job. The problem is that there's a lot of truth in this.

As Monti works to form a new technical government, Berlusconi has been working hard to avoid 'precarietá'. As someone with a mausoleum in preparation, symbolising a solidity and permanence which even death cannot brush aside, he is key. Berlusconi wanted to place his own men (such as Gianni Letta) into the government, influence the future of his own party, and ensure that his views are promulgated, as always, by his newspapers and TV stations. A low-budget film distributed in 2008, Ho ammazzato Berlusconi (I killed Berlusconi), based on the book, L'omicidio Berlusconi (Berlusconi's murder) by Andrea Salieri, hypothesises that even if Berlusconi were to be found dead, the mediatised version of him would live on as if nothing had happened. We can expect this to be reflected in Italy now.

As the celebrations of the supposed end of the Berlusconi era fade away, competing voices can be heard vying to claim their role in ousting him: Pier Luigi Bersani, of the opposition Democratic Party (Pd), for one. However, it must be acknowledged that the Pd had years to mount an effective defence, but Berlusconi only resigned under pressure from other EU states. The political opposition within Italy is, as ever, underwhelming. Significantly, it was a cultural figure, Roberto Benigni, who made a splash visiting the EU this week, where he gave an alternative account of Italian culture and politics, and declared Italy the country of miraculous resurrections. It is not clear what kind of 'resurrection' may take place under 'Super Mario' Monti. There is resistance in some circles to this entrustment of the nation to an unelected figure, and to a technocrat at that. He is hailed as a modest, family man, he attends mass, and has a reputation for having blocked the formation of financial monopolies. However, media depictions of him as a stable, safe pair of hands risk eulogising conservatism as the only alternative to rampant Berlusconismo; they also imply that Berlusconi will no longer be pulling strings, which, given his capacity for self-resurrection, may not be the case.

Dr Clodagh Brook, Dr Charlotte Ross, and Dr Daniele Albertazzi
Italian Studies, Department of Modern Languages and Culture, University of Birmingham, recipients of a British Academy award for their project on Oppositional cultures under Berlusconi. Editors of Resisting the Ride: Cultures of Opposition under Berlusconi (2001-06), published by Continuum (2009), and authors of a series of articles on Italy's cultural and socio-political opposition against Berlusconi.

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