

# Italy's radical Left in the Age of Berlusconi

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As has been well-documented by the international media in recent years, the image of the Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi is besmirched by accusations of illegal and improper behaviour, that range from alleged collusion with the mafia to the suspicion (recently given fresh impetus by Berlusconi's own wife) of having consorted with very young aspiring models <sup>2</sup>. Yet despite his much-reported exploits in the public eye, which, aside from raising criticism at home have also provoked international diplomatic incidents (one need only recall the moment when, as Italy took over the Presidency of the European Union in July 2003, Berlusconi suggested that the German MEP Martin Schultz should play the role of a concentration camp

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<sup>2</sup> BBC, 'Berlusconi seeks to placate Italy',  
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/8067110.stm>, 25/05/2009

guard in a film about the Holocaust <sup>3</sup>, his party the Popolo della libertà (People of Freedom party) has just confirmed its political lead in Italy, gaining 35% in the recent European elections of June 2009, while its main (centre-left) rival the Partito Democratico gained only 26% and the (divided) radical left failed to gain any seats whatsoever. It appears that Berlusconi's brand of populist conservatism has an unshakeable hold over the country, no matter what he does; yet it has not ever been thus in Italy.

In the wake of WW2 Italy became a laboratory for revolutionary thinking, with Marxist and neo-Fascist radical cultures targeting the capitalist, liberal-democratic, consumerist system that had been established in the country following the fall of Fascism. Despite the radical left and the neo-fascist right being marginalised politically and normally being excluded from government, revolutionary values continued to remain embedded in Italian society and greatly contributed to fuelling the social upheavals of 1968 and 1977. Indeed, Communist and, later, forces of the 'new left', enjoyed uninterrupted representation in Parliament until 2008 and, in the case of the Partito Comunista Italiano (the PCI) and its more moderate offshoots (Il Partito Democratico della Sinistra, later Democratici di Sinistra), also held onto positions of power at the local and regional levels for decades, particularly in the 'red' regions of central Italy. Moreover, because of the electoral strength of

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<sup>3</sup> BBC, 'Berlusconi jibe sparks EU storm',

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/3039912.stm>, 03/07/03

the Communists, the fact that the party was well rooted at the local level in parts of Italy and had links with the largest national Union, the values and culture of the leftist opposition could indeed be heard, and had considerable influence. For some, despite its marginalisation in political terms, the left was no less than culturally hegemonic in Italy during the Cold War.

Following the general elections of 2008 and the unexpected exclusion of many left-wing forces from Parliament <sup>4</sup>, radical leftist parties in particular have effectively been silenced, and right-wing thinking (grounded on the three pillars of populism, economic neo-liberalism and extreme, Vatican-inspired social conservatism), seems, if anything, to have become even more hegemonic. Radical activists now urgently need to ask themselves not only what model of society they want, but crucially how they are going to communicate it to the electorate and make themselves heard in a country where the right enjoys a very obvious advantage, as far as access to the media is concerned.

This paper argues that the left should firstly regroup itself in light of Berlusconi's continuing dominance of Italian political life, and then work at the definition of an overarching project and narrative able to clarify what alternative vision the opposition has to offer. We begin by summarising the 'state of play' in Italian politics following the elections of April 2008, before

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<sup>4</sup> Newell, J. (ed.) (2009) *The Italian General Election of 2008*. London: Palgrave.

moving back in time to briefly consider what the parliamentary left and the so-called ‘civil society’ and cultural/media practitioners that opposed the right had done during the years of Berlusconi’s second and third governments (i.e. 2001-2006). We then return to explore Berlusconi’s fourth government in light of what we can learn from the earlier period. As we will argue below, despite the modest impact of the opposition during the 2001-2006 period, new *means* of organising protest and communicating with the public that relied on the Internet and mobile technologies proved significant in keeping opposition alive. This was mainly due to the opportunities they offered for circumventing the exclusion from traditional media (especially television) that those opposing the right have been experiencing in recent years. As we will see, crucial to the visibility, and therefore impact, of oppositional players in this period were the transformations in the kinds of distribution available to political groups, social movements and cultural practitioners, and, importantly, their ability to use the available distribution creatively, extending and adapting it. Our concluding section will ask where the left is now, what can be learned from past experiences and what can be done to overcome the apparent crisis in which the opposition finds itself. We will argue that a renewed convergence of plans and objectives among the various political actors that aim at offering an alternative to Berlusconi is necessary, if not *with* the new born Partito Democratico (PD), at least on the left of it.

## The 2008 general election

The Italian general election of 2008 has been framed by many international newspapers as simply marking the 'return' to power (for a fourth time) of the media tycoon turned politician Silvio Berlusconi, following a short-lived centre-left government led by the former President of the European Commission Romano Prodi. However, the political environment to which the media entrepreneur has 'returned' has dramatically changed since the time Berlusconi left office in 2006. Due to a combination of the effects of a relatively new electoral law which disadvantages smaller parties, and the behaviour of the electorate (which has concentrated its support either on Berlusconi's own party or on its largest opponent, the PD, at the expense of many of the other parties), the Italian political arena has now been brutally simplified. Several medium-sized and small parties of both left and right have failed to reach the threshold for gaining any Parliamentary representation whatsoever, including Socialists, Communists and newer radical forces such as the Greens. This also means that the views of civil rights campaigners, as well as 'alter-globalisation' and anti-war activists (who historically had always found a home within the lists of radical parties), are also much less audible within official representative institutions.

The reasons for this historic defeat are varied. According to some, the moderate left must carry some of the blame for not seeking an electoral

alliance with the parties on its left (which then ended up failing to reach the threshold for entering Parliament), thus ‘using’ an election that Berlusconi was expected to win to obliterate the radical left <sup>5</sup>. A factor that also played an important role in keeping the supporters of the radical left away from the electoral booths in high numbers was the unpopularity of Romano Prodi’s 2006-2008 government <sup>6</sup>, which the left had backed in order to keep Berlusconi out of power. However, these explanations alone do not fully account for the scale of this defeat, with the PD losing the elections (as was expected) and the parties of the radical left haemorrhaging about 70 per cent of their votes (in part to the PD itself and in part to abstention) <sup>7</sup>. Clearly La Sinistra, l’Arcobaleno (the radical left alliance) looked too much like a patchwork of different colours, while failing to project a clear image and identity as an innovative force for change. In focusing on resisting Berlusconi’s resurgent influence, it failed to put forward a positive message about its own ability to govern in the future, making no real attempt to provide a synthesis between the very distinctive Socialist, Green, pro-Social movements and Communist cultures that it encompassed. Admittedly, the lack of time available did not help: elections were held only a few months after

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<sup>5</sup> Mastropaolo, A. (2009) ‘The Political Context: 2006-2008’, in Newell, J. (ed.) (2009) *The Italian General Election of 2008*. London: Palgrave.

<sup>6</sup> Tuorto, D. (2008) ‘Il primo motore del cambiamento: l’astensionismo’, in ITANES (ed.) *Il ritorno di Berlusconi: vincitori e vinti nelle elezioni del 2008*. Bologna: Il Mulino.

<sup>7</sup> ITANES (ed.) *Il ritorno di Berlusconi: vincitori e vinti nelle elezioni del 2008*. Bologna: Il Mulino.

Prodi was forced to resign, giving little time for organisation. Nonetheless, simply bringing together yet another motley-cruel of 'resistants' just did not wash with left-wing voters.

The situation in which the opposition now finds itself has severe repercussions for the quality of Italian democracy, since there is a consistent section of the population who oppose the values of *Berlusconismo* and who hold views on social justice, equality for all, sustainable development and international co-operation which they simply do not find represented in parliament at present, given the centrist and moderate strategy still pursued by the PD. Visibility is also a problem for the opposition on the left of the PD, since only parliamentary forces are constantly given space in the media, at least by the public service broadcaster RAI. This is particularly worrying given the right's control over information through PM Berlusconi's large media empire.<sup>8</sup> It is therefore not surprising if the right-wing values that Berlusconi embodies – he is a fan of Margaret Thatcher, was unashamedly pro-Bush and instrumentally pro-Vatican – seem set to remain hegemonic in the country, with Berlusconi still enjoying high popularity rates. Although it would be very simplistic to argue that Berlusconi's media power is the only key to his

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<sup>8</sup> In its 2009 report on press freedom in the world, the independent organisation Freedom House has downgraded Italy from 'free' to 'partly free' also due to the unresolved conflict of interests of Silvio Berlusconi and his continuing attempts to silence those journalists who criticise him by filing law suits against them.

success, there is little doubt that he has made good use of the opportunities afforded to him by his media (especially television) to set the agenda of public debate and gain positive coverage for the initiatives of his governments.

No hegemony can ever be all-embracing, of course, and, despite Berlusconi's influence, spaces of resistance have not been completely eliminated in Italy. This was clear during the years of Berlusconi's most recent stint in power before winning the 2008 election (i.e. the period 2001-2006). Radicals on the left will need to learn from the experiences of resistance that have characterised Berlusconi's governments in the very recent past in order to re-think the future. There are signs that Italy might be moving towards a system in which, although some small/medium parties may manage to survive and retain influence, the two largest parties (The PD on the left and the Berlusconi-led Popolo della Libertà (PdL) on the right) may in the foreseeable future hold the great majority of seats in Parliament and compete with each-other for government. If the radical left does not want to be annihilated, it must start from re-thinking its own experiences of opposition during the 2001-2006 period. It is to these experiences that we now turn, before addressing the question of what can be done *today*.

## **We Have Been Here Before... Opposition to Berlusconi between 2001 and 2006**



At the beginning of the twenty-first century, radical parties maintained a vociferous parliamentary opposition to the centre-right government's initiatives, and gained some significant symbolic victories. For instance, Rifondazione Comunista (RC) worked at strengthening its ties with social movements and minority groups as they struggled for civil rights (as testified by the number of high profile 'alter-globalisation' and openly gay/transgender politicians that the party managed to elect to the national Parliament and regional administrations). Ultimately, however, opposition from within the institutional left, including its radical elements, remained divided, and scored few victories. Indeed, the left failed to respond adequately to issues as diverse as Berlusconi's alleged *ad personam* legislation (the creation of laws to benefit himself and his associates), the violent repression of the G8 demonstrations in Genoa in 2001, and the restrictive legislation passed by Berlusconi's government on immigration. The impact of leftist struggles on the lives of minorities and marginalised groups in society was also modest, with LGBT communities, for instance, still experiencing severe discrimination both socially and in the workplace, and women still receiving much lower pay and having less job security than men <sup>9</sup>.

The perceived ineffectiveness of institutional opposition, however, coupled with the awareness of the threat that Berlusconi posed both politically and

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<sup>9</sup> Vento, S (2008) 'Famiglia e lavoro femminile in Italia', *Conquiste del lavoro* 8 March

culturally, encouraged a strong grass-roots response which, we believe, could still provide the opposition with some inspiration today. At the beginning of the new millennium, protest in the streets and piazzas increased sharply and new ways of re-claiming outdoor space sprang up. Besides the active and popular 'alter-globalisation' and anti-war movements that emerged in response to the G8 summit at Genova in 2001 and the invasion of Iraq in 2003 respectively, Italy also witnessed the largest demonstration the Union CGIL Confederazione generale italiana del lavoro (Italian General Confederation of Labour) had ever organised: In March 2001, between two and three million protestors stood against the government's attempted removal of the right of employees not to be dismissed 'without just cause' (a proposal that Berlusconi was eventually forced to drop). Opposition was not confined to the radical and unionized left, however. An interesting development in this period was that of the 'reflexive middle classes', who also found new ways of mobilizing and raising their voice. Concerned citizens started organising street events (the Girotondi demonstrations), holding hands around public buildings such as the Law Courts in Milan in order to 'protect them' from the verbal and legislative attacks of a PM who was repeatedly investigated for his past business dealings.

What most distinguished the opposition in this period from anything that had gone on before, however, was not so much what was going on in real space, but what was going on simultaneously in virtual space. Fuelled by the

diffusion of new technologies, deterritorialised radical oppositional spaces were created which both supplemented and galvanized interest in real space activist initiatives. Crucial to the visibility, and therefore impact, of oppositional players in this period were the transformations in the kinds of distribution available and practitioners' ability to use the available distribution creatively, extending and adapting it. Whereas in 2001 television was still the most important medium for distributing political messages and the Internet was having little impact, by 2006 the picture had changed, as Internet usage reached more than 35 percent of the population (albeit normally the better off and educated). The Internet, a growing medium for distribution, provided a new home for high- profile oppositional satirists and comedians who had been removed by Berlusconi from television or had always been seen as too radical to be hosted by terrestrial television. The most obvious example is that of the popular comedian Beppe Grillo, who launched a weblog in 2005 that has now gained unprecedented popularity for a non-English language site and plays a role similar to that of Michael Moore in America, as it exploits comedy to address serious political issues, mobilise sympathisers and launch campaigns <sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> Vaccari, C. (2009) 'Web Challenges to Berlusconi: An Analysis of Oppositional Sites', in D. Albertazzi, C. Brook, C. Ross and N. Rothenberg (eds) *Resisting the Tide: Cultures of Opposition Under Berlusconi (2001-2006)*. New York: Continuum.

The hold that Berlusconi has over Italy's media thus led to oppositional players using the increasingly porous nature of new media to their advantage. Between 2001 and 2006, oppositional material was distributed through internet blogs, smartmobs, satellite TV, oppositional magazines, DVDs sold through traditional channels and the internet, DVDs screened at political meetings and even in nightclubs. In other words, oppositional actors began to use an archipelago of increasingly important distributive solutions, which, while still far from rivalling the visibility of the traditional media, were growing remarkably rapidly and were capable of reaching a wide audience, both national and international. Censorship has thus been, to some extent, indirectly advantageous – in encouraging opposition to consider new media as an alternative to blocked traditional media, and so to progress further in mediums that are fast becoming the mainstream, thus facilitating increasing exposure. The shift to new media, caused in part by censorship, has also created a major and fundamental shift in the hierarchy of power: we now have a situation where non-specialists and those outside the traditional political system have increasing opportunities to disseminate knowledge and information within society rapidly, in a tentacular, capillary fashion.

In addition to the use of virtual space, further strategies of resistance were developed in this period, specifically associations *within* movements or communities, and *between* movements (or between movements and political parties). The shifting constituencies of the new social movements render

collaborations, and the associations they produce, productively flexible, but, crucially, it also renders them vulnerable to fragmentation <sup>11</sup>. Effective association within movements and among cultural practitioners relies on an ability to 'compromise', while the very multiplicity of perspectives and motivations embodied by the radically variegated and constantly evolving constituencies of new social movements and cultural texts may render this difficult. Several activist collaborations have struggled with such challenges: the 'No Global' movement, which had enjoyed strong public support and visibility in the wake of the events of Genoa in 2001, subsequently dissolved due to its evolving focus (from fighting neo-liberalism to opposing the war in Iraq). Relationships between the Girotondi movement, the CGIL and the institutional left have always been tense. Moreover, feeling delegitimised by their inability to mount an effective opposition to Berlusconi, the institutional left always seemed suspicious of realities that it could not control.

In some cases, it has been the movements that, for a variety of reasons, have attempted to manage their own political representation, rather than align themselves with one 'side' or another. For example, the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual) movement has sought ever more autonomy from political parties (despite fielding candidates in the lists of Rifondazione Comunista and others), due in part to disappointment with the

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<sup>11</sup> Melucci, A. (1996) *Challenging Codes. Collective Action in the Information Age*.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp115-116

opposition offered by the left between 2001-06 and to recognition that the movement must continue to lobby and attempt to work with whichever party is in power <sup>12</sup>; some feminist communities have been mistrustful of support offered by the State since this risks annexing their objectives to those of the current government <sup>13</sup>; affiliation between associations and political parties, such as between immigrant activist associations and the left, has at times been marked by a struggle of competing agendas, which risked blunting the edge of potentially powerful demonstrations or campaigns through in-fighting <sup>14</sup>.

### From Berlusconi to Berlusconi. What is Left of the Italian Left in 2009?

The absence of an effective opposition to Berlusconi, much debated during the Berlusconi years 2001-2006, still seriously affects the quality of Italian democracy today, as we observed earlier. During the first few months of the

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<sup>12</sup> Ross, C. (2009) 'Collective Association in the LGBT Movement' in D. Albertazzi, C. Brook, C. Ross and N. Rothenberg (eds) *Resisting the Tide: Cultures of Opposition Under Berlusconi (2001-2006)*. New York: Continuum.

<sup>13</sup> Della Porta, D. (2003), 'The women's movement, the left and the State. Continuities and changes in the Italian case', in L. A. Banaszak, K. Beckwith and D. Rucht (eds), *Women's Movements Facing the Reconfigured State*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 48–68.

<sup>14</sup> Pojmann, W. (2009) 'Adopt a Domestic Worker? The Response of Immigrant Associations to the Centre-Right' in D. Albertazzi, C. Brook, C. Ross and N.

new 'Berlusconi era', the biggest party of opposition, the PD, has appeared unsure about whether it should attack the PM or instead tone down its criticism in order to win support from so-called 'moderates' – at one point it even considered coming to an agreement with the right on constitutional reform. The party is now in a limbo following the resignation of its secretary Walter Veltroni in February 2009.

In the absence of radical left-wing forces, the only party represented in Parliament that has continued to make vehement attacks on Berlusconi is Italia dei Valori (IdV), a party totally dependent on the image of its founder, the high-profile magistrate Antonio Di Pietro. Di Pietro's opposition to Berlusconi, however, focuses mainly on the latter's unsuitability as the country's leader due to his conflict of interests, control of the media and problems with the law. Since Berlusconi has become PM again, IdV has thus vociferously opposed Berlusconi's fresh initiatives to pass legislation which protects his interests and saves him from prosecution (most recently through a new immunity law covering the highest offices in the country). In recent months, IdV has been very outspoken in criticizing Berlusconi's dominance of the media and 'use' of Parliament for his own ends. Indeed, Di Pietro has spoken of a 'regime' that has been put in place by Berlusconi. IdV's approach

seems to have benefited the party in electoral terms<sup>15</sup>; however politically IdV is centrist and its views on issues such as sustainable development, the rights of workers and civil liberties are mildly progressive (certainly not 'radical'). In short, IdV cannot be the one to give voice to leftist critiques of the neoliberal and fiercely pro-Capitalist *model of development* that Berlusconi has always promoted and defended. So, what is left of radical leftist critiques of the right in Italy today, following the recent heavy electoral defeats?

It is clearly very difficult to provide a picture of what has been happening since the 2008 election. Events which seem significant now may prove in a few months or years to be far less so and the impact of such events is hard to judge without seeing them in a longer timeframe. However, what we can say is that when Berlusconi returned to power in 2008, social movements, radical intellectuals and artists were slow to respond. Nonetheless, two developments this year, the re-emergence of the students' movement in autumn 2008 and the opposition to the actions of the government during the final weeks of the 'Englaro affair', have been significant. These have created widespread debate in the national media and given new impetus to criticism of the Berlusconi government. Importantly, both have to do with fundamental values that the radical left should be able to re-think and defend – as there is a consistent

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<sup>15</sup> Although National and European elections are not fully comparable, it is interesting to notice that IdV went up from 4.4 per cent in 2008 to 8 per cent in the European elections of June 2009.



part of the electorate that clearly cares about them: the need for Italy to reverse the tide of underinvestment in its education system (which generally only reaches excellence in primary education), giving true opportunities *to all*, and the separation of Church and State (a principle that the moderate left cannot consistently defend, given the prominence that former Christian Democrats have within the Partito Democratico).

The wave of protests that arose in the autumn against a reform of primary, secondary and university education known as the 'Gelmini reform' (from the name of the Minister who had proposed it), spurred a wave of comments about a new alliance having been forged among students, parents and teachers, surmounting generational and professional boundaries. According to its critics, this reform was nothing more than a cynical cost-cutting exercise of about 700 million euros (gained mainly by reducing the staff working in the education sector). The reform was opposed throughout the autumn by a vocal movement backed by the major national Unions CGIL, CISL and UIL. Throughout October and November 2008 demonstrations were staged across the country, most of which were peaceful and attracted very large crowds. Various initiatives such as the occupation of universities throughout Italy and the organisation of lectures held 'in the open' remained widespread throughout the autumn. Despite the government agreeing to revisit some limited aspects of the reform following the considerable upheaval witnessed in October and November, the bulk of it (especially the considerable cuts) was

left untouched. With the dying down of the student movement in recent months, the impression is that we are witnessing a repeat of 2002, when students took to the street to oppose another reform of the education system (the Moratti reform) that was duly approved by Parliament regardless of the opposition (and was only abolished by the left later on, when it gained a majority in Parliament following its electoral victory of 2006).

Another focus of opposition to the Berlusconi government has been the events surrounding the death of Eluana Englaro. On 13th November 2008 the Court of Cassation confirmed a previous ruling on the part of Milan's Court of Appeal that would allow the suspension of feeding and hydration for the woman, who had been in a coma since a road accident in 1992. However, despite the fact that the highest courts in Italy and Europe supported suspending nutrition, Berlusconi, with strong backing from the Vatican (which was outraged by the rulings), attempted to get an emergency decree law passed which would reverse the rulings and 'save' Eluana by refusing to allow those caring for those in a state like Eluana's to suspend artificial feeding. Critics of Berlusconi's move saw it as a cynical and deliberate attempt to undermine the constitutional pillars of democratic society – specifically the crucial notion of the separation of state powers – and reaffirm his personal authority. Indeed, Berlusconi's initiative led to an unprecedented head-on battle with President Napolitano, who refused to sign the decree, while garnering favour with the Catholic Church and Catholic voters. The case is

significant because it shows how closely Church and Government can still be aligned, and because it is apparent that Berlusconi was using the Englaro case to reaffirm his authority vis a vis the President: as the leader of the coalition that had won the elections, Berlusconi argued at the time, he was the one who should have been allowed to effectively 'govern' without interference.

Interestingly, the Englaro case also tested the power of the opposition: sit-ins in piazzas were organised; demonstrations and large groups formed in support of Napolitano and Englaro's father (who advocated the suspension of nutrition in his daughter's best interests), both in 'real' space, and in the virtual spaces of social networking sites such as Facebook; protest messages circulated via text and email. The protest continued unabated after Englaro's death and on 12th February the PD organised a demonstration in defence of the Constitution, also attended by IdV. However, although the case demonstrates how rapidly and successfully demonstrations can be organised through virtual (and real) networks, ultimately the opposition – in both the piazza and in virtual online space – failed to make a significant enough impact and on 27<sup>th</sup> February, after much debate inside and outside parliament, a law was passed making it illegal to refuse hydration and nutrition, and thus overriding the will of the individual.

As can be seen from these brief accounts of recent activism, the 'piazza' continues to be a key focus for political struggles in a country where the word

is used as a synecdoche for popular protest; however, increasingly real space is interacting with virtual space and the *new media* are central to the dissemination of oppositional messages. The organisation of protests now takes place on the web; video recordings of events are disseminated through YouTube, and through the online papers and websites of protest groups; discussions of various initiatives take place before, during and after the event in dedicated weblogs. Facebook, while not yet a key player during the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Berlusconi government, has suddenly exploded in the 4<sup>th</sup> Berlusconi government, allowing those opposed to Berlusconi and his policies to meet virtually and to organise. During the student protest groups like *Internate la Gelmini* (Intern Gelmini) and *Scommetto che almeno 5 milioni di persone odiano la Gelmini* (I bet that at least 5,000,000 people hate Gelmini) were born, with the latter already boasting 13,000 members by the end of October 2008 <sup>16</sup>. Even sabotage may become virtual, as seen in the blacking out of the Finance Minister Giulio Tremonti's home page by a slogan on the part of left-wing students on 2 November 2008. Since Berlusconi's return to power in 2008, therefore, protest has made itself visible in the new mediums of communication – especially the Internet – but these are *in alliance with*, not at the expense of the 'good old piazza', which is still seen as an important site of resistance and a place in which to build consensus. Political satire on television, blocked by Berlusconi in 2001-06, also appears to have made a return in 2008, with numerous shows satirising politicians, especially from

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<sup>16</sup> De Luca, Maria Novella, 'Roma in corteo studenti e mamme, *Repubblica* 24/10/2008.

the Berlusconi camp. The famous comedian Sabina Guzzanti, removed from television during the 2001-2006 period of Berlusconi's government has returned, appearing repeatedly on *Annozero*, a programme hosted by Michele Santoro, a journalist who had also been 'ostracised' from state television under a previous Berlusconi government. Guzzanti is joined on the networks by her sister Caterina, and by comedians Paola Cortellesi, Gabriella Germani and others, all of whom satirise Berlusconi or members of his government. The return of satire to television – the main medium through which the majority of the population gathers political intelligence in a country where circulation of newspapers is comparatively low – alongside the rapid growth of internet protest are significant developments. It remains to be seen whether artists in mediums whose communication takes longer to prepare (playwrights, writers, filmmakers) will become involved again in attacking Berlusconi as they did – even if on a small scale – in 2001-06.

## Conclusions

Voices of opposition clearly exist in Italy, although they have not always been effective in opposing Berlusconi's governments, as recent election results confirm. One of the most obvious limitations of the many oppositional movements and initiatives that have sprung up during the 'Berlusconi years', is that they have often lasted only for a season or two. What is still lacking

today is an overarching project which is alternative to Berlusconi's governments and values; one that can challenge his agenda of restricting workers' rights, weakening the Constitution and instrumentally promoting social conservatism while keeping a strong hold on the country's communication system. Importantly, the government's policies are opposed by large strata of the population, a much larger constituency of voters than those who supported the radical left in recent elections.

Alliances are constantly being forged in the context of the fluid communities of new social movements, especially given the added dimension of virtual mobilisation. However, in order to present a viable alternative to the right, radical forces cannot simply go on being the 'sum' of collaborations between cultures that remain all too jealous of their distinctiveness. They need to open up and be able to enter into dialogue with movements and civil society – of which they have sometimes been suspicious. The necessary sensibility and attention to individuals and to the needs of specific groups must be subsumed under the umbrella of collaborative activism and must again benefit from a renewed convergence of plans and objectives. The pluralization of mediums through which radical leftist views are articulated reveals a resilience among cultural practitioners and activists groups in the face of Berlusconi's hold over the mainstream media in Italy; similarly, the multiplicity of identity positions promoted within new social movements displays a fierce resistance to the homogenization of the subject. Yet this plurality of purpose must remain an

enriching quality – while in Italy it has turned too often into a limiting factor. The re-entrenching into ‘purely Communist’, competing with ‘Green/Socialist’ identities, that seems to have taken hold of the leadership of the radical left in recent months following the defeat of La Sinistra, L’Arcobaleno in 2008, and the temptation to divide the left even further, must be resisted. The radical left paid a high price in 2008 for the lack of popularity of the Prodi government (an issue that will not present itself again at the next general election), and has suffered due to its inability to put forward a coherent alternative political project, which could be seen to be more than the sum of its parts. Unlike 2008, it is possible (even likely) that the left will now have four more years at its disposal to regroup before the next general elections. And yet, at the European elections of 2009 parties of the radical left competed with one other, so that, after failing to enter the Italian Parliament in 2008, no Italian radical force has managed to enter the European Parliament in 2009. In the light of the deep crisis that has shaken the PD and its apparent inability to attract support from moderate voters (despite its attempts to flirt with centrist forces), the radical left must now use the time it has at its disposal before the next general election to create a plural and multiple (but *united*) front of the radical opposition, characterised by its own, recognisable political project. It might ultimately be the only way to stem what, given Berlusconi’s personal approval rates and the recent election result, still very much looks like a very powerful tide.

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