

SILVIO BERLUSCONI

TELEVISION, POWER
AND PATRIMONY



PAUL GINSBORG



VERSO

London • New York

(2004)

2: THE MAKING OF A TELEVISION EMPIRE

1. Family crisis

The villa at Arcore was soon ready to receive the Berlusconi family, which took up residence there in the second half of the 1970s. As often happens, extreme luxury offered no guarantee of domestic tranquillity. In 1980, at the age of forty-four, Berlusconi fell in love with a young, voluptuous and intelligent actress from Bologna, Veronica Lario, twenty years his junior. The *coup de foudre* is said to have occurred at the Teatro Manzoni in Milan, which Berlusconi happened to own, and where Veronica Lario was playing in Fernand Crommelynck's comedy, *Il magnifico cornuto*.¹

Berlusconi was to fall passionately in love with Lario, but kept his affair hidden for a number of years. He installed Veronica and her mother in one wing of the former Villa Borletti in central Milan – the other wing was his business headquarters – while his family continued to live at Arcore, outside the city. All the testimonies of that time tell of a Berlusconi riven by guilt. His secret love affair

conflicted with his loyalty to his family and his deep-felt need to be loved, even worshipped, by all members of his family and entourage. As usual, he tried to reconcile the irreconcilable, and at least in his private life he in part succeeded. When Veronica gave birth to their child, Barbara, in July 1984, he immediately recognised the child, and a year later he and Carla Dall'Oglio separated. It was not to be an acrimonious divorce. Carla was more than adequately provided for, and not banished from the Berlusconi entourage. The two children of the first marriage were to work closely with their father in Fininvest, which in 1984 became the overall name for Berlusconi's group of companies.² Marina in particular soon demonstrated many of the business qualities of her father.

Veronica Lario and Silvio Berlusconi were to have two other children – Eleonora and Luigi, born in 1986 and 1988. Theirs was to be a successful as well as unconventional marriage, with Lario playing a role far distant from the stereotypical figure of the uncritical and unconditionally supportive companion of the Great Man. She refused to live at Arcore, sent their children to the Steiner school at Milan, declined to play the First Lady when Berlusconi became Prime Minister, and voiced publicly her disagreement with her husband's support of the Iraq war of 2003. Berlusconi has admitted to loneliness in his time as leader of Italy. His wife has not been by his side, but has made very clear her support and affection for him.³

¹ Fiori, *Il venditore*, pp. 75–76; Mario Oriani (ed.), *Berlusconi story*, Milan 1994, p. 19.

Crommelynck's *Le Cocu magnifique* was staged for the first time in Paris in 1920.

² Mario Molteni, *Il gruppo Fininvest*, Turin 1997, p. 92.

³ Maria Larella and Veronica Berlusconi, 'Dialogo tra due madri contro la guerra di Bush', *Micromega*, 2003, no. 2, pp. 7–18.

2. Masons

In March 1981 the Milanese magistrates, Gherardo Colombo and Giuliano Turone, while conducting enquiries into the disgraced banker Michele Sindona, came across the list of 962 persons belonging to a secret Masonic lodge, the P2 (Propaganda 2). The list contained a substantial if idiosyncratic section of the nation's power elite. It included the names of all the heads of the secret services, 195 officers of the various armed corps of the Republic, among whom were twelve generals from the Carabinieri, twenty-two from the army, and eight admirals. There were forty-four members of parliament, including three ministers and the secretary of one of the ruling parties, the Social Democrat Pietro Longo. Magistrates, some prefects and heads of police, bankers and businessmen, civil servants and media men made up the remainder of the list. Silvio Berlusconi was on it, at number 1,816 (the numbers went from 1,600 upwards, which suggests that the complete list may never have been found).

The aims of the lodge, whose nominal head, Licio Gelli, seemed too insignificant a figure for the role, were conspiratorial and anti-Communist. The P2 formed part of the secret history which never lay far below the surface of the Italian Republic. Some of that history was farce, some much less so. To reconstruct its subterranean workings is almost impossible. Nearly always the intent was to limit or destroy Italian democracy – though always with the reiterated patriotic goal of saving the country from its principal enemies, the Italian Communist Party (PCI) and the trade unions.

At the time of the lodge's foundation, the PCI had reached the height of its powers, with more than one in three Italians voting for it. To combat its influence, P2 aimed to infiltrate political parties, newspapers and trade unions by means of what one of the organ-

ation's secret documents called 'economic-financial manoeuvres': 'sums not exceeding 30 to 40 billion lira would seem sufficient to allow carefully chosen men, acting in good faith, to conquer key posts necessary for overall control.'⁴ In 1977, the lodge had made such progress as to succeed in gaining covert control of Italy's leading newspaper, the *Corriere della Sera*. The fortuitous unmasking of P2 was thus extremely timely. The lodge had devoted itself, in the words of the majority report of the Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry, 'to the pollution of the public life of a nation'.⁵

What was Silvio Berlusconi doing in such an organisation? The most likely answer is 'nothing much', for there is no evidence to show that he played a strategic role within it. He probably joined to extend his range of contacts, to raise his visibility, to continue that extensive 'networking' which his friend Confalonieri rated as one of the keys to his success. Membership could also facilitate the accumulation of capital. During the 1970s, Giovanni Cresti, the director general of Siena's influential bank, the Monte dei Paschi, granted Berlusconi's companies extensive credit on very favourable terms. Although it could not be proved that Cresti was a member of the lodge – his name was not on the list – he was known to be a close friend of Licio Gelli.⁶

⁴ *Commissione parlamentare d'inchiesta sulla Loggia massonica P2*, vol. 7, pt. 1, p. 196. The organisation's two key documents, dating probably from the period 1975–76, entitled 'Memorandum sulla situazione italiana' and 'Piano di rinascita democratica', are published in A. Cecchi, *Storia della P2*, Rome 1985.

⁵ *Commissione parlamentare d'inchiesta sulla Loggia massonica P2*, *Sigla no. 2, Relazione conclusiva di maggioranza*, p. 164. From 1977 onwards, so it emerged later, the owner of the *Corriere della Sera*, Angelo Rizzoli, was a member of the P2, as were the managing director, Bruno Tassan Din, and the editor, Franco Di Bella. Berlusconi himself wrote a series of articles for the newspaper from 10 April 1978 onwards.

⁶ See the internal enquiry carried out by the Monte dei Paschi, reported in Fiori, *Il venditore*, pp. 60–3. One hundred and nineteen members of the P2 were employed in banks or in the treasury and finance ministries.

There is no evidence to show that Berlusconi was an active conspirator, but his membership is revealing in a number of ways. One was that he took pains to deny it. In 1988 he was to tell a court in Verona that his membership dated from just before the scandal broke, and that he had never paid an inscription fee. Both statements were untrue. In 1990 the Venetian Court of Appeal condemned him for false testimony. This is the only definitive sentence of guilt that has been passed on him.

The other revealing aspect concerns Berlusconi's political convictions. Even if he was not a leading member of the lodge, he must have been aware of its overall aims. The lodge's anti-Communism, its insistence on the need to destroy the independence of the judiciary and its strategy to take over key elements of the media of that time were all elements that were to figure prominently in Berlusconi's own political project in the future. So, too, was the idea that patriotic values could best be nurtured within a heavily piloted democracy.

3. Commercial television

The 1980s were to witness the transformation of Berlusconi from a highly successful provincial building entrepreneur into a figure of national repute. The vehicle for this transformation was commercial television, then in its infancy in Italy. A number of factors encouraged Berlusconi to make the leap. One was the vulnerability of the Italian building trade, subject to periodic and crippling crises. Another, as he explained on one occasion to Marcello Dell'Utri, was the immediacy that television offered an entrepreneur: 'In the building trade you plan something today and you see it realised in ten years' time. In television you think of it in the morning and in the evening it's already on the screen'. Dell'Utri commented: 'The medium of

television was profoundly congenial to Berlusconi's character. It inspired him because of the speed with which he could put into practice the ideas that went through his head. I'd go further: television is Berlusconi.⁷ This symbiotic relationship with the medium of television is fundamental to our understanding of the man.

Another strong motive for his change of direction was that commercial television offered an unprecedented opportunity for him to make quick money. Here, as we shall see below, the role of Berlusconi's advertising company, Publitalia, founded in 1979 and run by Marcello Dell'Utri from 1982 onwards, was to be crucial. The increase in its turnover was spectacular: 12 billion lire in 1980; 900 billion by 1984; 2,167 billion by the end of the decade. Already by 1984, 85 percent of Fininvest's income came from the television division, and nearly 2,000 members of its 3,500 workforce were employed there.⁸

Of almost equal significance was the fact that in the early 1980s Berlusconi acquired a political patron of great importance. Bettino Craxi, the leader of the Italian Socialist party, was to become President of the Council of Ministers in 1983. Massive and intimidating, a shrewd tactician and inveterate anti-Communist, Craxi offered a modernising veneer which Italy's two major parties, the Christian Democrats and Communists, both lacked. He, too, was Milanese, very much in tune with the fashion-conscious, high-tech consumerism which characterised the city in the new decade. Under his leadership, politics were to be personalised and simplified, they were to have a strong showbiz element, their principal medium was to be television. There was little that was Socialist in all this, but much of southern

7 Ferrari, *Il padrone*, pp. 69-70.

8 Molteni, *Fininvest*, p. 67, table 4.2; Madron, *Le geste*, p. 102; Sandro Gerbi, 'I conti del Gruppo Berlusconi. Esame del bilancio consolidato 1984', *Problemi dell'informazione*, vol. 11 (1986), no. 4, pp. 601-8.

European Socialism was going in the same direction in the 1980s. Craxi was to become the ideal guide and protector for Berlusconi. By 1984 the men were firm friends, with Craxi agreeing to be the godfather (*compare*) of Barbara, the child born out of wedlock to Berlusconi and Veronica Lario. No Christian Democrat leader would have considered such a gesture.

Berlusconi viewed his shift into commercial television as something of a crusade, a way of breaking the grip of a staid, more restrictive Italy, which found its cultural expression in the monopoly exercised by RAI, the public broadcasting company. He explained later:

Viewers avidly desired things that were different from those which the RAI offered . . . they wanted shows that went on late, whereas the RAI closed up shop at 11:00 P.M. Basically, private television was an act of transgression which tempted great numbers of people. I thought about all those things which could enter their homes — game shows, quiz shows, information, but also advertisements and consumer goods.⁹

Here was a ground plan from which he was not to shift for two decades.

In France in the early 1980s Bernard Tapie, a figure who resembled Berlusconi in many ways, was reaching the height of his popularity. Tapie offered the French the three 'Rs': *'le Rêve, le Rire, le Risque'*. He claimed these to be a rule of life far superior to that which the Agnelli family had evolved for FIAT and for the Juventus football team. There, in Turin, the three 'Ss' reigned supreme: *'Semplicità, Serietà, Sobrietà'*.

⁹ Ferrari, *Il padrone*, p. 70.

Tapie and Berlusconi, as well as Murdoch in the earlier part of his career, all wanted to contest and break free from the old elites, both in business and in public institutions.¹⁰ Tapie made his first fortune by buying up old and ailing firms, restructuring and downsizing them ferociously, and then selling them off again. He rapidly became a business idol in France. In April 1985, at the Grand Auditorium of the Palais des Congrès in Paris, he staged what was described as France's first 'business show'. Invited by the École Supérieure des Dirigeants d'Entreprise (ESDE), he filled the auditorium (capacity of 4,000) twice over. Hundreds of young people came to hear him. The journalist Anne Sinclair asked him: 'How did you get to where you are?' Tapie replied: 'Because I love myself', a reply that Berlusconi would very much have appreciated. In early 1986 Tapie launched his television programme *Ambitions*. Young people were given the chance to start their own businesses, and the programme followed their progress. *Ambitions*, which was transmitted at 8:30 P.M. on Friday evening, gained an initial audience share of 34 percent.¹¹

Tapie's success was in many ways more spectacular than that of Berlusconi — he was a more accomplished showman — but the Italian's was more soundly based. Tapie competed programmes on television, Berlusconi bought up the television stations themselves. Structural conditions in Italy were on his side. Throughout the 1980s, a decade which has rightly been described as fatal for the sector, Italian commercial television was left without regulation.¹² Back in July 1976, the

¹⁰ Murdoch was incensed in particular by British complacency and snobishness. 'They distrust money,' he asserted. 'They despise business. They create the social and psychological currents which have done so much damage to Britain and its willingness to change'; Shawcross, *Murdoch*, p. 31, as well as Bouchet, *Tapie*, p. 26.

¹¹ J. Villeneuve, *Le mythe Tapie*, Paris 1988, pp. 52–7 and 64–7.

¹² Paolo Caretti, 'Informazione: l'anomalia italiana', *Democrazia e Diritto*, vol. 41 (2003), no. 1, pp. 169–70. The Constitutional Court was to intervene frequently on these issues, but without conspicuous success.

Italian Constitutional Court had laid down some guidelines. National broadcasting was to be reserved for public television, but local commercial operators could henceforth begin transmissions.¹³ The Court declared that either was a collective resource and asked parliament to legislate with urgency for the whole area of the mass media. In particular, it requested respect for what it called internal and external pluralism. The first was to ensure that the different voices of Italian civil society found expression on television. The second that the ownership of television channels should not be unduly concentrated.

All this was willfully ignored by the politicians of the time, and by Bettino Craxi in particular. At just 11.4 percent of the electorate in 1983, the Italian Socialists were still far too small a force for the ambitions of their leader. Craxi had the power of veto over the formation of government coalitions, he could even become President of the Council of Ministers, but he wanted the Socialists to be a great European force, like their Spanish or French counterparts. The unhindered and meteoric rise of his friend Berlusconi was a unique opportunity for increasing the media influence and clientelistic networks of his own party.¹⁴

The result was that years passed during which an unchecked free-for-all reigned in the world of commercial television. These were perfect conditions for Silvio Berlusconi. He was the most dynamic of the new television entrepreneurs, the one who was prepared to sail

¹³ Local commercial transmissions were to be permitted on the grounds that there were sufficient frequencies available 'to permit the freedom of private initiative without danger of private monopolies or oligopolies'; A. Pace, 'La radiotelevisione in Italia con particolare riguardo alla emittenza privata', *Rivista Trimestrale di Diritto Pubblico*, vol. 37 (1987) no. 3, p. 623.

¹⁴ The Italian journalist Piero Ottone recounted in 1994: 'I have followed his [Craxi's] activities over the years, on occasion at close quarters, and I remember the superhuman efforts he made to prevent Parliament from passing legislation on television regulation'; 'Italia dei furbi', *Ulisse*, vol. 7 (1994), no. 12, quoted in Fiori, *Il venditore*, p. 100.

closest to the wind in legal terms, and who seemed to have access to the greatest quantities of capital. His principal competition at the time, Edilio Rusconi of the Rusconi publishing group, who owned the channel Rete 4, and Mario Formenton of the Mondadori group, which owned Italia 1, were both convinced that antitrust legislation was on its way, and that they could not stray too far from local transmission. Only Berlusconi risked illegality, buying up local stations in the whole of the peninsula, ensuring clear reception, and explicitly establishing a national network for his Canale 5, the heir of the little TeleMilano of Milano 2. Naturally enough, he was opposed to any regulation, for here was negative freedom at work in undiluted form.¹⁵ By 1984 he had bought out both Rusconi and Formenton. With his three major channels, Canale 5, Rete 4 and Italia 1, transmitting nationally, he had established a near monopoly.

On 16 October 1984, three magistrates from Turin, Rome and Pescara respectively gave orders for Berlusconi's television stations to be partially blacked out. Their argument was very simple. The ruling of the Constitutional Court in 1976 made provision for *local* but not *national* commercial broadcasting, and Berlusconi's three national channels were in breach of these provisions. A significant part of Italy found itself without Mediaset transmissions. It was a disconcerting experience. That day its programmes included the favourite children's cartoon, *The Smurfs*, *Dallas*, *Dynasty* and *High Noon* (all scheduled for Canale 5), as well as *New York*, *New York* on Rete 4. It was not a good moment to have a blank screen.¹⁶

¹⁵ He told Alberto Statera in 1983: 'For my part, I am convinced that there is no need for any legislation, because the market, here as elsewhere, contains all the antibodies necessary to regulate itself'; A. Statera, 'Silvio Berlusconi', in N. Ajello et al., *Perché loro*, Bari 1984, p. 217.

¹⁶ The best reconstruction of this extraordinary event and its aftermath is to be found in Fiori, *Il venditore*, pp. 105–20, upon which my own account is heavily dependent.

Predictably enough, the popular outcry was considerable. Berlusconi's channels, which continued to transmit to the rest of the country, fanned the flames, demanding respect for a new citizen's right, 'freedom to use the television's automatic controls' (*libertà di telecomando*). In the face of this mediatic crisis, the first in the history of the Italian Republic, Bettino Craxi reacted with a speed and determination which could only have been called exemplary had they been employed for another and worthier cause. The Council of Ministers was summoned to meet on Saturday, 20 October, and immediately issued a decree law (*decreto legge*), valid for six months, ordering the resumption of national commercial transmissions. At the same time the new Socialist spokesman for telecommunications, Paolo Pillitteri, Craxi's brother-in-law and later to be mayor of Milan, announced: 'The magistrates' initiative is all the more inappropriate at a moment when parliament is in the process of examining and refining a new law on private television transmissions.'¹⁷ In the event, the law regulating telecommunications was only passed in August 1990, fourteen years after the Constitutional Court had invoked its necessity. The new law merely sanctioned the status quo, leaving Berlusconi's empire untouched.

This unedifying story was dense with implications. All over the world the relationship between media ownership and political power has been an intimate one. After Rupert Murdoch threw the weight of his newspapers (*The Sun* and *The News of the World*) behind Mrs. Thatcher in the 1979 elections, she wrote to thank *The Sun's* editor Larry Lamb, and in 1980 knighted him for his 'services to journalism'. When Murdoch took over *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* in 1981,

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

his bid was not referred to the Monopolies Commission. The pledges he gave on editorial independence were soon to be flouted, but no action was taken against him. Throughout the 1980s, Thatcher and Murdoch were linked in a close relationship, two faces of the same relentless neoliberal drive towards deregulation and the concentration of power. Murdoch came to control British satellite television and 36 percent of its printed press.¹⁸

There are many other such stories. Israel Asper, for instance, became Canada's senior media tycoon in the year 2000 when he bought up most of Conrad Black's Canadian media holdings. Asper worked closely with Canada's current Prime Minister, Jean Chrétien, and as a result strongly discouraged criticism of him in any part of his Can West Global Communications. In France in the 1980s, Robert Hersant, the right-wing owner of a very considerable media empire, courted assiduously both Jacques Chirac and Valéry Giscard d'Estaing. One of Giscard's closest lieutenants even held a post at the Socpresse, Hersant's major holding company.¹⁹

The Italian case went still further because it involved the regulation, or rather the lack of it, of the *entire* commercial television sector. In the 1970s, the Italian political class had already effectively divided public television between them, with RAI 1 a fiefdom of the Christian Democrats, RAI 2 of the Socialists, and RAI 3 of the Communists. This could hardly be considered correct practice, or the encouragement of a tradition of public broadcasting autonomy, but at least there existed a plurality of voices and positions.²⁰ No such pluralism, either

¹⁸ Eldridge, Kitzinger and Williams, *Mass Media*, pp. 33–42; Shawcross, *Murdoch*, p. 210.

¹⁹ For Hersant, see Tunstall and Palmer, *Media Moguls*, pp. 141–51; for Asper, see Cathryn Atkinson's obituary, *Guardian*, 16 October 2003.

²⁰ For a detailed and convincing history of the RAI, see Franco Monteleone, *Storia della radio e della televisione in Italia*, 3rd ed., Venice 2003. RAI television had begun in 1954.

internal or external, was to reign for the private sector. In the 1980s, Bettino Craxi, much more so than the Christian Democrats, realised how rich were the pickings to be had there, and how formidable an operator was his friend from Milan.²¹ His were valid enough considerations from a narrowly party point of view, but they were poison for Italian democracy in the key area of media policy.

4. 'Non è la RAI'

The commercial television system which Berlusconi built up was profoundly American in character, and was to have a conspicuous effect upon the cultural life of the nation. It is worth describing in detail. Berlusconi organised the programming of his channels substantially as a mixture of films and telefilms, quiz and variety shows, cartoons and sport, with football preeminent in this last category. He operated under one peculiar restriction. Until the telecommunications law of August 1990, Italian commercial television was prohibited from broadcasting live. The most important consequence of this prohibition, which was all the stranger for being maintained in a context otherwise dominated by total *laissez-faire*, was the impossibility of presenting news bulletins.

For the rest, Berlusconi rapidly acquired a vast library of old films, telefilms and cartoons, buying up liberally from the archives of Titanus in particular, but also MGM, Warner, Disney and some American television companies. Carlo Freccero made good use of the films for one of the earliest and most successful programmes of Canale 5, *Pomeriggio con sentimento* (1981), which showed a classic American or

Italian film every afternoon from 2:00 P.M. onwards, and which set the tone for afternoon programming on Italian television. What was true of the afternoon was also true of the morning. *Buongiorno Italia* (Canale 5, 1981), modelled on *Good Morning America*, with its cooking tips, women's fashion, gymnastic exercises and so on, introduced the Italians, especially housewives, to the delights of breakfast television. Quiz shows were primarily in the safe hands of Italy's veteran compère, Mike Bongiorno, an iconic figure who had been responsible for the nation's most famous quiz show, *Lascia o raddoppia?*, which dated back to 1955.²² Berlusconi had recruited him from the RAI at a very early date, and his *I sogni nel cassetto* marked the official opening of Canale 5 in November 1980.²³ The working friendship between the two men has lasted more than two decades. As for telefilms and soap operas, they were once again American, and only later in small part Brazilian and Italian. In 1982 Canale 5's *Flamingo Road* and *Dallas* vied with Retequattro's *Dynasty*; in 1983 its mini-series *Thornbirds*, bought from the ABC, was triumphant over Retequattro's very costly *Winds of War* (Paramount and ABC). Cartoons were at first American and then increasingly Japanese. *The Simpsons* arrived on Canale 5 in 1991. Finally, football was first represented by *Mondialito* (Canale 5, 1982), a competition between club sides of different nations, which had originated in Uruguay but which Canale 5 was to make its own in the 1980s.²⁴

²² See the seminal article by Umberto Eco, 'Verso una civiltà della visione?' (1961), now published as 'Fenomenologia di Mike Bongiorno' in his *Diario minimo*, Milan 1992, pp. 29–34.

²³ The party to launch the new quiz show, which offered prizes far superior to those of the RAI, took place on the banks of the artificial lake at the centre of Milano 2; Molteni, *Fiminvest*, p. 71.

²⁴ The encyclopaedic and indispensable guide to the history of Italian television programmes is Aldo Grasso, *Storia della televisione italiana*, 2nd ed., Milan 2000. The dates in brackets in my text refer to the year in which programmes were first screened.

²¹ A convincing analysis of the relationships that developed in and around the Socialist party in the 1980s is to be found in Luciano Cafagna, *Una strana disfatta*, Venice 1996, esp. pp. 138–9.

In terms of content, it is important to stress that Berlusconi's massive importation of American material was to a great extent indiscriminate, in the sense of not being subject on his part to rigorous ideological censorship. What mattered was audience levels, not political correctness. Hollywood films were transmitted which sometimes expressed values far distant from Berlusconi's own. Cartoons like *The Smurfs*, with their ecological emphasis, or *The Simpsons*, which highlights losers rather than winners in American life, could in no way be considered 'organic' to Berlusconi's project.²⁵ At this early stage popularity was all.

One of the few areas of distinction, in Bourdieu's sense of the term, came with variety shows, omnipresent on Italian television. Here not only was production autochthonous, but the styling of some of Berlusconi's programmes was significantly innovative. *Drive in* (Italia 1, 1983) was paradigmatic in this respect. Its mixture of demented humour, repetitiveness, imitations, even transgression – with early barbs against rampant Milanese yuppies – its fragmented and chaotic timing, invented television slang and scarcely clad vallettes marked it off suddenly from the strider RAI productions of the time. *Drive in*, which from 1984 went on the air on Sundays at 8:30 P.M., and which was repeated until 1988, enjoyed a mass youth following.²⁶ In broad terms, Berlusconi's three channels were designed for different audiences: Italia 1 was aimed at youth, Retequattro catered primarily to housewives and pensioners, and Canale 5 was designated for family viewing.

The gender politics of this new commercial television are fascinating, but very rarely touched upon. Let us look at the body first. Berlusconi is often held responsible for enticing Italian housewives to undress in front of the television cameras, but this is not strictly true,

nor part of his style. Umberto Smaila's programme, *Colpo grosso* (Italia 7, 1987), a show which involved young Italians of both sexes gaining quiz points by slowly shedding their clothing (though never their underpants), was not broadcast on one of Berlusconi's channels.²⁷ Nor was its formula copied by them. On the other hand, Mediaset's programmes were heavily sexually oriented, in a lecherous way that stopped just short of nudity. Every middle-aged compère was, and still is, accompanied by scantily dressed soubrettes. Cameras zoomed in upon them from below and behind, emphasizing anatomical detail whenever possible. Rarely had the 'erotic gaze' been so crudely constructed.²⁸ This was a very far cry from the RAI. So, too, was the explicitly titled 'Non è la Rai' (Canale 5, 1991), broadcast at lunchtime, with its numerous cast of very young girls dancing provocatively in body stockings to the popular music of the time. To be one of them was the dream of every thirteen-year-old Italian girl returning from school, to desire them the fate of every man who had ever read Nabokov's *Lolita*.

Beyond body politics and the representations of desire lay more general gender choices. Women, not only on Mediaset but on the RAI as well, were almost always treated as decorative 'chickens' (*galline*), without an idea in their heads. They could aspire to be newscasters. In exceptional cases, like Raffaella Carrà, they could run their own variety shows. But there was no inkling of gender equality, no influence, however slight, of the feminism of those years. Quite the contrary. Avuncular condescension reigned supreme, ripe with sexual innuendo, though sometimes masked by an old-style gallantry. Women were required to play along, and did.

²⁵ On *The Simpsons*, Paul Cantor's excellent 'The Simpsons: atomist politics and the nuclear family', *Political Theory*, vol. 27 (1999), no. 6, pp. 734–49.

²⁶ Grasso, *Storia della televisione italiana*, pp. 400–2.

²⁷ However, it is true that Berlusconi indirectly controlled, by means of Publitalia, the publicity revenues and thus the lifeblood of Italia 7.

²⁸ See the renowned article by Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen*, vol. 16 (1975), no. 3, and the ensuing debate.

When analysing a media culture, its silences are as important as its noises. On Berlusconi's channels there was a lot of entertainment but little room for the real world. The ban on live broadcasting certainly did not help, but what documentaries there were tended to be on animals, not humans, with the result that it was easier to be informed about the habitat of penguins than social conditions in southern Italy. In general, Mediaset made few programmes itself. Although it enjoyed the luxury of broadcasting on three national channels, it made no space for a quality arm of commercial television, such as that constituted by the British Channel 4 from 1982 onwards. Such an omission was to cost, and still costs, Berlusconi dear in terms of his overall cultural image.

4. The publicity empire

Advertising revenue was the driving force and determinant of Berlusconi's television, with audience ratings the undisputed arbiter of programme choices. As Nora Rizzi has explained, the aim of commercial television in general was *not* to know how to produce programmes, which is or should be the rule in public television, but to know how to produce, by means of the programmes on offer, television audiences; that is, the consumers required by the market of investors in publicity.²⁹

In this exercise, Berlusconi proved to be a master. Conditions were extremely favourable for him. By the 1980s in Italy there were several thousand firms which wished to advertise more fully on television but were unable to do so. The tradition of advertising on

Italian public television had been a carefully restricted one. It was in line with the policy of most European public television, and derived in particular from the early Christian Democrats' diffidence towards unregulated consumer culture. From 1957 onwards, publicity on the RAI had been concentrated principally in the legendary *Carosello*. Broadcast at 8.50 p.m. for ten minutes, after the news and before the children went to bed, *Carosello* featured four or five little stories, at the end of each of which the product being advertised was briefly nominated.³⁰

As always with the Christian Democrats, behind noble intentions lay more squalid realities. The RAI's associated advertising company, Sipra, under the control of the redoubtable Colonel Fiore, granted the limited advertising space available as if performing a personal, political and religious dispensation. The breaking of this clientelistic monopoly offered great opportunities.³¹

Berlusconi made the most of his chances. His rivals in early commercial television, Rusconi and Mondadori, were both major owners of print media, with considerable experience selling advertising space to firms. Berlusconi soon outdid them both. His boast, behind which lay considerable acumen, was: 'I don't sell space, I sell sales.'³² In other words, he wished to guarantee to potential advertisers not just the insertion of a certain number of spots at fixed times, but the control of the whole environment in which the advertisement was located, ensuring value for money and above all increased sales of the product in question. Television advertising derives its being from a golden chain of connection: from the marketing department of a firm to the advertising agency, to the crew making the spot, to the television company and its programmes, finally to the consumer

²⁹ Nora Rizzi, 'Il palinsesto come fattore di produzione. Evoluzione delle logiche di programmazione nell'emittenza commerciale', *Problemi dell'informazione*, vol. 15 (1990), no. 4, p. 530.

³⁰ O. Calabrese, *Carosello o dell'educazione serale*, Florence 1975.

³¹ D'Anna and Moncalvo (eds), *Berlusconi in Concert*, pp. 63-4.

³² Fiori, *Il venditore*, p. 93.

at home. Berlusconi tried to intervene in as many parts of this process as he could. In particular, he cut out the advertising agencies, offering instead a direct line to his television channels, with Publitalia absorbing the 15 percent fee charged by the agencies.³³

In his new crusade, Berlusconi mobilised both himself and Publitalia's army of young salesmen. Important customers were invited individually to Arcore, charmed over lunch, and promised special discounts and efficient follow-up services. Some were even treated to Berlusconi at the piano. It was a far cry from the queue outside colonel Fiore's office at Sipra. Berlusconi issued precise instructions to his team of salesmen. They were, like him, to have the 'sun in their pockets', to exude optimism and courtesy. They were forbidden to smoke or have long hair, or beards, or even moustaches. Their breath was to be fresh and their hair without dandruff. They were never to put their briefcases on the table of their client, nor take off their jackets in his presence. They had to memorise the birthdays of their clients, as well as those of their wives and children. Flowers for their secretaries, mimosa on women's day (8 March). Above all, no sweaty handshakes. In his 'Confidential advice for selling advertising space', an informal lecture of 1994, Berlusconi said, 'On the basis of my professional experience, I can confide to you that I have always won by being professional. If I've always won out, it's been rarely thanks to my talent, a few times thanks to the luck of an amateur, but I have always won thanks to technique.'³⁴ As early as 1983, Publitalia had cornered 43 percent of the total market of television advertising.³⁵

Publitalia was never to relax its grip in the coming years. In 1995 Marialina Marcucci, the owner of Videomusic, a small, independent commercial channel with a strong youth audience, recounted how she

33 Molteni, *Il gruppo Fininvest*, p. 74.

34 D'Anna and Moncalvo (eds), *Berlusconi in Concert*, p. 300.

35 Gerbi, 'I conti del gruppo Berlusconi', p. 601.

had been forced to sell up. By hogging the whole market in television publicity, Publitalia had made it impossible for small companies like hers to survive:

I remember once, it was at the end of the eighties, that we had signed an agreement with [the ice cream company] Algida for their summer campaign of advertisements. It was a contract worth 70 million lira in all: peanuts compared with the sort of sums that were being spent on advertising on Silvio Berlusconi's channels. Even so, the Publitalia sellers of advertising space tried to undercut us. They offered Algida very favourable terms if the company agreed to spend all its advertising budget on the Fininvest channels. . . . All in all, you could say that the only company that has never let itself be intimidated by Publitalia has been Coca-Cola. . . . Usually, though, the firms give way. And from their point of view it's quite comprehensible because they have their budgets to balance.³⁶

According to David Forgacs' calculations, in 1984 the RAI showed 46,080 advertisements for a total of 311 hours of advertising, whereas commercial channels showed 494,000 advertisements for a total of 3,468 hours; in all, circa 1,500 television advertisements per day were being shown in Italy, more than in all the other European countries put together.³⁷ The onslaught was not only temporal but aural: volume automatically increased at advertisement time, not only for adults' programmes but children's as well. There was little in all this of Vance Packard's famous 'hidden persuaders'.³⁸ Italian commer-

36 C. Gallucci, 'Sola contro un dannato Biscione', *L'Espresso*, vol. 41 (1995), no. 11, 17 March, pp. 47-50.

37 D. Forgacs, *Italian Culture in the Industrial Era, 1880-1980*, Manchester 1990, pp. 184-5.

38 Vance Packard, *Hidden Persuaders*, New York 1957.

cial television advertisements in the 1980s were a noisy, endlessly repetitive, frontal attack upon fledgling consumers as well as hardened veterans of the world of goods.³⁹ Children's programmes were constantly interrupted as Gig toys, one of the leaders in the sector, displayed with blaring tones the full range of its robots, castles and racing cars for the boys, and dolls, their houses and their clothes for the girls. No one should underestimate the effect of such a barrage in forming, and not just reflecting, family patterns of consumption.

Far from separating out programmes, film stories and advertisers' names, as in *Carosello*, Berlusconi's channels strove to create a seamless web between programmes and adverts. In this they followed a consolidated American tradition, which had begun with *The Maxwell House Showboat*, a radio programme of the 1930s, and had flowered in the golden age of American television in the 1950s, with programmes like the *Kraft Television Theater*.⁴⁰ Mike Bongiorno, once again, was the innovator in Italy. In *Superflash*, a 1982 quiz show, he adopted the American habit of himself sponsoring a product in the heart of the transmission. Others followed suit. Suddenly compères were sipping coffee in the middle of their shows, eating salami and smacking their lips, lying down on mattresses, carefully aided by the ever-attendant soubrettes. Some of the more intelligent TV compères adopted a vaguely ironical approach, others simply went through a dull and servile routine in return for a great deal of money.

How far was this different in any way from the other commercial televisions which were flourishing all over the world at the same

time? Certainly, there was a great deal that was quintessentially American – not just the programmes themselves, but the quantity of advertising and the overall style. However, certain key elements distinguish the Italian experience from others. First, in no other democracy did commercial television develop under the almost complete control of a single individual. Second, no regulatory body was set up to oversee standards. The Guarantor for Telecommunications, introduced in 1990, was designed to be toothless from birth. Third, Italian public television lacked the traditions to respond to the new challenge of commercial competitors in a way that would distinguish it from its challenger. Too dependent upon the political parties and lacking an autonomous culture, the RAI ended up by aping Mediaset and competing with it exclusively on its own terms – those of audience rating. Only RAI 3 constituted a partial exception. Overall, though, there was no public television to fly the flag of editorially independent news, civic responsibility, well-researched documentaries and quality programmes which could appeal at different times to both majorities and special interests. The Italian viewing public was profoundly bereft of all of this.

Of course, the debate about the degree to which media, and television in particular, determine people's culture and eventually their political allegiance is a wide-ranging and complicated one. Certainly, it would be foolish to assume that individuals and families simply imbibed the oft-repeated messages of the new commercial television. In the Italian case, at least one study has revealed how delicate the connections are between viewing and family values, and how much translation, criticism and rejection is involved in the reception of television programmes.⁴¹ However, it would be even more foolhardy to claim that the influence of television is marginal.

³⁹ For an interesting analysis of the type and quantity of advertisements in these years, R. Grandi, *Come parla la pubblicità*, Milan 1987, especially p. 14.

⁴⁰ Greg Myers, *Ad Worlds*, London 1999, p. 117.

⁴¹ F. Casetti (ed.), *L'ospite fisso*, Milano 1995.

In Italy, the Eurisko survey of 1986 compared the frequency of certain key elements of cultural consumption: 86.3 percent of interviewees watched television on a daily basis, compared to only 46.4 percent who listened to the radio and 41.4 percent who read a newspaper. Only 17 percent went to the cinema once or more a month, and 6.1 percent to a museum. Television was the only daily 'cultural' activity of the average Italian family.⁴²

In the same year of the Eurisko survey, the novelist Alberto Moravia recounted in a delicate article in the *Corriere della Sera* his experience of being seen on television, and reflected on what exactly television was:

Those who [have seen me on television] greet me in the street with sincere affection. . . . But when I ask them if they have read any of my work they often reply, without much apparent regret, that because they go to work they have no time to read. And here we come to the mystery of what television really is, of whether it is a pastime or something else. The reply that they give me signifies implicitly that, since they find time for television, but not for reading, then the mass media in question is not a traditional pastime. So what is it then? This is the point I wanted to get to. Television, I think, is something like sleeping or eating: a physiological need, which reading obviously isn't. In any case, the record for the dissociation that television produces between me as pure image and me as a writer came some days ago in Verona. In the main square of the city, a girl came running up to me

42 G. Calvi (ed.), *Indagine sociale italiana. Rapporto 1986*, Milan 1986, p. 172 and table 5.14, p. 173. For a good introduction to the way in which the vast debate on the influence of the media has developed over time, see J. Curran, M. Gurevitch and J. Woolacott, 'The study of the media: theoretical approaches', in O. Boyd-Barrett and P. Braham (eds), *Media, Knowledge and Power*, London 1987, pp. 57-79. On television and the family, see the important works of David Morley, *Family Television: Cultural Power and Domestic Leisure*, London 1986, and *Home Territories, Media, Mobility and Identity*, London 2000.

and exclaimed: 'How happy I am to make your acquaintance: who are you?' The phrase signified that she had already seen me on television, and as a result she loved me; but she had no idea who I was.⁴³

Given the nature of television as a particular 'physiological need', and the subtle powers of 'pure image', it might have been expected that the advent in Italy of its commercial version would give rise to prolonged debate. The opposite was the case. Instead, a grotesque duopoly was created: on the one side a flagging public broadcasting system, on the other the suffocating preeminence of Berlusconi's three channels. The combination produced a deeply conformist, repetitive and uncritically consumer-oriented television system pumped out not just from 2001, when Berlusconi won political power in a decisive fashion, but from the early 1980s onwards. The connection between this twenty-year period of cultural conditioning and Berlusconi's eventual political triumph is a fundamental one. I shall return to it in the second part of this book, when analysing Berlusconi's overall political project.

It is worth adding a word on Berlusconi's other media property, especially his print interests. As I wrote at the beginning of this book, Berlusconi has distinguished himself for being a television tycoon rather than a newspaper baron. Television has been the medium that he has most understood, loved and exploited. Nonetheless, he also built up a considerable print empire. At its heart was *Sorrisi e Canzoni*, a typical television-oriented weekly magazine which combines the

43 Alberto Moravia, 'Amare il prossimo di affetto televisivo,' *Corriere della Sera*, 20 August 1986; quoted in Aldo Grasso, *Storia della televisione italiana*, pp. 455-6.

times of the programmes with information and gossip about them. Berlusconi was careful not to exclude the stars and starlets of the RAI, and to offer accurate information on the schedules of all the Italian television channels. He was rewarded with a circulation of some three million copies by November 1986. He also invested in the newspaper *Il Giornale*, which had as its editor the veteran journalist Indro Montanelli. This story, though, did not end well, because Montanelli became increasingly exasperated by the owner's interference in the editorial line of the paper, and eventually left along with much of his staff. Montanelli, a liberal conservative, was then to become one of Berlusconi's most implacable critics until his death in July 2001, at the age of ninety-two. *Il Giornale* is presently owned by Berlusconi's brother, Paolo, but has never flowered into being Italy's major conservative newspaper. That title still belongs firmly to the *Corriere della Sera*, which sells 685,000 copies per day, compared to the 220,000 of *Il Giornale*.

Last but not least, in 1990 Italy's largest publishing house, Mondadori, became part of Berlusconi's empire. The battle for its control proved to be a very bitter one. It was resolved only by a Roman court of law, which found in favour of Berlusconi and against his rival Carlo De Benedetti, at the time the owner of Olivetti. However, in 2003, Cesare Previti, the lawyer who had joined the Berlusconi clan after the purchase of Arcore, was condemned to eleven years' imprisonment for having successfully corrupted the Roman judges in the original court case. Only the Italian legal system, which allows a defendant to go free until condemned by all three grades of justice, kept Previti out of prison.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ See ch. 6 below, p. 145.

5. Football

Since childhood, Berlusconi had been an ardent fan of the famous Milanese football club, AC Milan. His father had taken him regularly to the stadium on Sundays. In March 1986, as the crowning element of what was an outstandingly successful decade, Berlusconi decided to buy up the ailing club. It belonged, so he said, to 'the sphere of affections', not to that of economic calculation.⁴⁵ He hesitated a long time before making the purchase. He was afraid of being seen as too narrowly partisan by a nation renowned for its divided loyalties, both on and off the field. But in 1982 Italy had won its first World Cup since the Fascist period, and national football fever was then at its height. The opportunity to link personal and municipal sporting triumph to national television audiences and both to consumer advertising was too great for Berlusconi to turn down. In July 1986, the members of the new AC Milan team were presented to 10,000 fans at the city's Arena. The team arrived by helicopter, with loudspeakers playing Wagner's *The Ride of the Valkyries*: 'I knew very well that people would laugh at me,' Berlusconi recounted later, 'even treat me with irony. But we needed to show that the whole way of thinking at AC Milan had changed.'⁴⁶ The event was subsequently transmitted repeatedly on all three of his television channels. For the new 1986-87 season some 65,000 season tickets were sold, an all-time record.

In France, 1986 was also the year in which Bernard Tapie bought up the Olympique of Marseilles, another ailing football team, though much less famous than Berlusconi's AC Milan. Both men were rapidly to take their clubs to a series of unexpected national and international

⁴⁵ Ferrari, *Il padrone*, p. 129.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 134-5.

triumphs – sure proof, or so it seemed, that their business dynamism could be successfully applied to other fields. Tapie, indeed, was to be first into the political arena, using his new-found popularity at Marseilles to launch his career first as a Socialist then as a Radical politician. His triumphs, though, were short-lived. Embroiled in a number of financial scandals, in 1996–97 he fell rapidly from grace and was eventually condemned by the courts.⁴⁷

Berlusconi has lasted the course very much better. At AC Milan, as elsewhere in his business empire in the early part of his career, there was significant evidence of bold and unconventional choices which paid off handsomely. Just as Hollywood films, if they were popular enough, were to be shown on television regardless of their content, so Milan was to acquire new players, and a new manager, who were far from conformist. The élan of Dutch football of the time came to light up the grey Sunday afternoons at the San Siro stadium. Marc Van Basten, Ruud Gullit and Frank Rijkaard were at the heart of the new team, alongside outstanding Italian defenders like Franco Baresi and the young Paolo Maldini. Gullit was a special case. His family came from Suriname, he wore dreadlocks in the manner of Bob Marley, and was committed to antiracism at an international level. His speed and elegance on the field entranced the Milanese fans. Within a few months San Siro's terraces were full of youths with their faces painted black, their hair coloured with the red and black of Milan AC, and with dreadlocks falling over their shoulders. Berlusconi, too, espoused an antiracist position: 'I explained to them [the fan clubs] that it was possible to support a club without being violent or intolerant. The Milanese fans that I had inherited were those who unfurled banners with anti-Semitic and racist slogans on them. That mentality had to go.'⁴⁸

In 1987 the little-known Arrigo Sacchi arrived as Milan's new manager. His combination of constant pressing, marking by zone and almost mathematical organisation of the relationship between defence, midfield and attack, was highly controversial but bore almost immediate fruit in the hothouse atmosphere of the new AC Milan. The team won the Italian championship in 1988. At Barcellona in May 1989 it crushed Steaua Bucharest 4–0 to take the European Champion's Cup.⁴⁹ At the end of the same year it won the Intercontinental Cup, the highest possible accolade for a club team. AC Milan's successes were to continue throughout the early 1990s.

As has often been pointed out, football metaphors abound in Berlusconi's language, and the name of his political party, Forza Italia ('go for it, Italy!') derives from the chanting of the fans of Italy's national team. Soccer was Italy's 'deep play'.⁵⁰ It was an abiding passion, revelatory of elements of the nation's deeper popular culture of which Berlusconi aspired to be the foremost interpreter. In the 1980s in Italy the game was big business, as it was to become in Britain ten years later. Football fed naturally into television and played to huge audiences, passive recipients of ever-greater amounts of advertising. Postgame analyses took up peak viewing time on many channels on Sunday and Monday night, reaching grotesque levels of repetition. The links between global markets, television advertising and club ownership were visible everywhere.

By the end of the 1980s Berlusconi had achieved everything he could have wished for. Of course, as with all tycoons worth the

⁴⁹ In order to transport 26,000 fans to Barcellona, the club chartered a ship, twenty-five aeroplanes and 450 buses.

⁵⁰ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York 1973, pp. 448–51. Codifying in Bali, the object of his study, is 'set aside from [everyday] life as "only a game" and reconnected to it as "more than a game"' (ibid., p. 450). For an extended discussion of football as Italy's 'deep play', see P. Ginsborg, *Italy and its Discontents*, London 2001, pp. 112–19.

⁴⁷ Bouchet, *Tapie*, pp. 39ff; André Bercoff, *Comment ils ont ruiné Tapie*, Paris 1998.

⁴⁸ Ferrari, *Il padrone*, p. 135.

name, there was no question of stopping there. 'Let's be sincere,' he said in 1989, when a journalist asked him if he would consider selling AC Milan now that he had transformed it so successfully, 'in the whole of my life I have never bought anything, however small, with the slightest intention of it being sold again.'⁵¹ Patrimonial instincts such as these were unusual. So too, as we shall see, was Berlusconi's determination to defend what he had acquired.

3: INTO POLITICS

1. Clean hands

It can safely be said, paradoxical though it may appear, that without the reforming zeal of Francesco Saverio Borrelli, the distinguished magistrate who was to become the Chief Procurator at Milan, Silvio Berlusconi would never have been Italy's Prime Minister. By the beginning of the 1990s, Berlusconi had every reason to be content with his lot. Not only was he Italy's outstanding businessman, but he was protected, even cosseted, by the ruling group of Italy's politicians. In 1989 the so-called 'CAF' had come into being. Its name derived from the first letters of the surnames of the three men who had created it, the Socialist Bettino Craxi, the Christian Democrats Giulio Andreotti and Arnaldo Forlani. It was they who piloted through parliament the Telecommunications' Law of 1990, so favourable to Berlusconi's new empire.

The 'normal' relationship in a neoliberal democracy between media tycoon and sympathetic political leadership was thus in full swing. Each has its own sphere of operations. The media tycoon lurks behind politics, but is not *in* politics. He derives advantage from the actions of sympathetic politicians, and repays it with conspicuous and benev-

⁵¹ Ferrari, *Il padrone*, p. 136. On Berlusconi and football, see also the interesting chapter in Tobias Jones, *The Dark Heart of Italy*, London 2003, pp. 61–85.