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**“POPULIST MASCULINITIES”**

*Power and sexuality in the Italian populist imaginary.*

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I was one of those. On the side of the ones who challenged the world order. With each defeat we tested the strength of the plan. We lost everything each time, so that we could stand in its way. Barehanded, with no alternative. I review the faces one by one, that universal parade ground of men and women that I am taking with me to another world. A sob shakes my chest, and I spit out that muddle, unresolved. My brothers, they haven't beaten us. We're still free to plough the waves.

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- Wu Ming, 1999 -

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## ***Introduction***

Today populism has re-emerged as a prominent phenomenon in the democratic countries of Europe. For the past decade right wing populism has been haunting Austria, The Netherlands, Belgium, Great Britain, France, Denmark, Norway, and Italy, if we consider only West Europe. Populist manifestations have reached dramatic peaks when, for example, the extreme radical right wing politician George Haider was elected as Prime Minister in 2000 in Austria and Jean Marie Le Pen, a post-fascist parliamentarian, ran against the outgoing President Jacques Chirac during the second ballot of the presidential election in France in April 2002. Recently, the 2010 national elections in the Netherlands saw the rise of the PVV, the islamophobic right wing party of Geert Wilders, breaching the “liberal” bent of the Dutch political system.

The political position that right wing populist leaders have obtained in Europe in the last years does not necessarily mean that European democracies are turning anti-democratic. As Ivan Krastev writes in his article “The Populist Moment” (2007), international comparison<sup>1</sup> has proved that the majority of the electors across the world agree that democracy is the best form of government available. However, some of the people interviewed claim that the governments of their countries have not been listening the voices of their people. This discontent of the actions of the liberal political elites has generated a political space that has allowed populist movements to discursively transform politics into an arena where the ‘people’ are fighting against the establishment which is framed as a ‘corrupt elite’. Populist discourses attract the electors to a charismatic leader who seems to literally personify the presumed desires of ‘the people’.

This research will analyze the antagonism that populism creates in the political environment through the investigation of one of the most popular European cases of populism: the Italian right wing coalition headed by Silvio Berlusconi. Italy is an interesting case study because it can be considered “a laboratory of populism” (Tarchi 2003). Marco Tarchi develops the phrase in order to underline a specific characteristic of Italian politics in comparison to other European countries: in Italy populism is in power. Prime Minister Berlusconi entered Italian politics in 1993 and he has been in office three times thanks to a political alliance with the leaders of other

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<sup>1</sup> I refer to the statistic “Voice of the People 2006”, a global opinion poll conducted by Gallup International in 2006.

right wing parties' Umberto Bossi and Gianfranco Fini. Furthermore, Berlusconi is a media tycoon who owns Italy's biggest media empire as well as being one of the richest men in the world. The intersecting of medial, political and economical power elevates the Italian case as a paradigm of populism.

In analyzing the parties "Il Popolo della Libertà" and the "Lega Nord", I will bring to the fore the European populist movements' capacity of engaging with imagination, storytelling, and their creation of myths. In fact, the process of rewriting collective memories and idealizing national symbols of belonging has put the electorate in an ongoing process of identification with the populist discourses of the charismatic leader.

Moreover, the Italian case might be an important case study of how gender<sup>2</sup> patterns play a relevant role in populist discourses. My research will investigate what kind of connection there is between the populist appeal to the 'people' and the publicity of Berlusconi's virile masculinity in the media which culminates in his selecting show girls and models for political candidates in European and national elections.

This mechanism of recruiting people through gender identities operates also outside of Italy. In United States, during the last presidential election, the Republican Alaska's Governor Sarah Palin based her political candidacy on a specific image of a woman. Through public debates she has marked herself capable of being a politically aggressive woman, but at the same time she insists that she is also a calm and responsible orthodox catholic mother and a sexy wife. She defined herself as a *'pitbull in lipstick'*. This expression reflects a mixture of gender and cultural stereotypes that Palin uses to reinforce the mechanism of identification between her and the *'real Americans'*.

Sarah Palin's protagonism in the politics of the United States can be seen as a reflection on the role of women in right wing populist movements also in Europe. The Dutch Rita Verdonk, the actual Italian Minister of Equal Opportunities Mara Carfagna, the Danish Pia Kjaersgaard, to name but a few, reflect a new female political participation in European populist politics. These women have a political language and agenda very different from the women's political interventions during the 60s and 70s. Several feminist thinkers consider this phenomenon an important

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<sup>2</sup> By "gender" this research wants to point out a set of overlapping and contradictory cultural descriptions and prescriptions referring to sexual difference which arise from and regulate particular social, political, economic contexts. (Van Zoonen 1994: 4).

signal of post-feminism, or an active process by which progressive feminist gains of the 60s and 70s come to be undermined. This research will engage with this debate on post-feminism, specifically by analyzing Italian feminist and post-feminist actors.

This research will try and find an answer to the following questions: which representations of gender have been conveyed by the contemporary construction of Italian populism? What are the effects of these gender representations on the formation of national collective identities and popular culture? How are feminist thinkers and activists to understand the appropriation of some feminist agendas by populist and racist right wing politicians?

The thesis is organized in four chapters. First of all, I will explain the theoretical approach taken to develop my research questions. In the first chapter I will explain why Laclau's definition of populism clarifies how Silvio Berlusconi and Umberto Bossi have been able to mobilize the Italian electorate. Then, I will proceed to analyze the different feminist theoretical accounts suitable to investigate which gender patterns and identities Italian right wing populism adopts so as to appeal to the 'people'. I will also look at the feminist critique on media studies, in a way to analyze the relation between media and political communication. This will help to understand how the Prime Minister Berlusconi is the most important actor in the 'mediatization' of Italian democracy. Finally, I will describe and justify 'discourse analysis' as my research method.

In the second chapter, *The Rise and Consolidation of Italian Right Wing Populism*, I will provide a critical overview of the historical and cultural causes which can explain the success of Italian populism. Looking at the fascist regime and the populist movement 'Qualunquismo', I will trace the historical roots of Italian populism. Moreover, I will highlight the socio-political conditions that made the emergence of charismatic leaders such as Berlusconi and Bossi in Italy possible, such as the dissolution of the Christian Democrat Party and the Communist Party, and 'Tangentopoli' events. Finally, I will investigate in specific what kind of popular imaginaries, symbols and ideologies the Lega Nord and Silvio Berlusconi's populist discourses have exploited to create political unity within their followers.

The last two chapters represent the core of my research. In fact I will analyze in which ways Italian populism interpellates the Italian electorate through gender representations. In *Populist virilities: right wing rhetoric and women as national fetish*, I will

reveal how certain hegemonic masculinities and femininities are regarded as universal and natural in political discourses, and how they manifest through the leader's behavior and popular culture. This will illustrate that female representations and women's bodies become sexual and racial signifiers of populist identities. To support this argument, I will take in consideration the Lega Nord's beauty contest "Miss Padania" and the hyper-sexualization of women's images in political posters. Finally, acknowledging that in Italy the role of television is extremely influential in the public debate, I will investigate how television and advertisements produce and reinforce a sexist view of gender relations in Italian society.

The fourth and last chapter, *Post-Patriarchy, Post-Feminism and Backlash: Women's Subjectivity in Neo-Populist Politics*, will examine the feminist debate on widespread sexism in Italian media and politics. In particular, how Italian feminist thinkers have questioned the sexualization of mainstream culture and the connection between sex, money and power that lies at the base of Berlusconi's populism. I will also consider how neoliberalism and neo-conservative populism have deeply challenged feminist discourses of women's agency. This will be explained through the concepts 'backlash' and 'postfeminism' applied to the analysis of the political activism of the right wing Minister of Equal Opportunities Mara Carfagna.



# ***1. Theoretical and Methodological Framework***

## **1.1 Populism: a discursive analysis of the phenomenon**

What does the term populism exactly refer to? This question comes up immediately because the concept of populism has been used to describe a variegated number of political actors and policies. Tracing back the “populist” social movement’s history, the concept of populism had been already applied to the American farmers’ protest<sup>3</sup> as well as Russia’s narodniki movement<sup>4</sup> at the end of the nineteenth century. This term then became popular in the 1960s and 1970s when it was attributed to the elusive nature of the political regimes in Third World countries governed by charismatic leaders. It was applied above all to Latin American politics.

Today the concept of populism is connected to a diversified ensemble of actors and policies. Silvio Berlusconi, Hugo Chavez, Mahmoud Ahmedinejad, Geert Wilders, the Polish Kaczyński brothers are all considered populist leaders by commentators and several political players. The attribution of populism to such political leaders across the world, across time, as well as across ideological schemes and discursive styles can be confusing. This, then, is the reason why in political science there has been an academic consensus on defining populism not as a definite political regime with identifiable political programmes or world views (Fella and Ruzza 2009, Tarchi 2003, Taggart 2000, Canovan 1999, Altan 1989).

What is interesting for this research is to investigate the role of populist movements in “modern democracies”. For this reason, the definition of this term is worth carefully considering. This research shares with many political analysts the necessity to refuse the negative connotation attributed to the concept of populism by journalists, mass media and public opinion. Sociologists, historians and political scientists all agree that the term populism should have a descriptive function instead of

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<sup>3</sup> This movement was based among poor white cotton farmers in the South (especially North Carolina, Alabama and Texas), and hard-pressed wheat farmers in the Plains states (especially Kansas and Nebraska) in the 1887. It represented a radical crusading form of agrarianism and hostility to banks, railroads and elites. It became also a short lived party called the People’s Party.

<sup>4</sup> Narodniki movement grouped socially conscious members of the middle class in the 1860s and 1870s in Czarist Russia. Their ideas and actions were supporting the peasantry conflict against the more prosperous farmers (the *kulaks*). This group shared the common general aims of destroying the Russian monarchy and the *kulaks*, and distributing land among the peasantry.

being a label for political prejudices minimize or pathologize the phenomenon<sup>5</sup>. This enables me to investigate populist movements as a mature, stable and prominent political phenomenon of liberal democracies.

In political theory, empirical analyses have underlined that populism has specific features because they are recurrent in time and in space. Populism is generally seen as a political mobilization that challenges not only the established power-holders but also the elite values in the name of the people (Canovan 1999). In any populist movement there is a strong appeal to the concept of ‘the people’, and appeals to this concept are considered to be what guarantees the political legitimacy of the political order. In this regard, Marco Tarchi describes populism as ‘forma mentis’ (Tarchi 2003), or mindset, a vision of the social and political order which is based on the natural virtues of the people who are the source of political action and governmental legitimacy. Another important element of populism is the creation of ‘the enemies of the people’ against whom populist parties direct their political claims. The populist mentality is structured dichotomously: whoever doesn’t correspond to the ideal image that populists have of their members, or whoever disagrees with the values and native traditions held up by them, is seen as an enemy, a threat, and an obstacle to remove. The political elites are commonly labeled as the enemy in populist debates. Parties and professional politicians are considered the main people responsible for the social problems recurrent in society, due to the corruption and the clientelism that characterizes their political activity. There are also other groups that have been the target of populist antipathy: the bureaucrats, the intellectuals, the political specialists and, last but not least, immigrants. Nowadays in Europe the latter group is the main receptor of right wing populist movements’ resentment. In European multi-ethnic societies where migration has introduced an element of social instability within society, populist movements exploit it for political opportunism, echoing and discursively producing feelings of xenophobia and racism.

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<sup>5</sup> Within many social sciences studies, populism has been denigratedly analyzed. The reason for this according to Laclau (2005) stems from the ethical condemnation of populist movements. This condemnation finds its historical origin in the discursive construction of a certain normality (Foucault would say “normativity”) of the political sphere. In the nineteenth-century there has been a huge debate concerning ‘mass psychology’. This discussion opened the social frontier that separated between the normal and the pathological, and classified populism as a negative political phenomenon.

The last common element identified in studies of populism is the role of a leader who can represent ‘the voice of the people’ and who is able to give form to the aspirations, desires and claims of ‘the people’ (Meny and Surel 2002, Taguieff 2003).

Although the analyses of the abovementioned authors are extremely significant for any investigation of populism, they lack a theoretical account of how populism is able to create ‘the people’ and mobilize them discursively. Indeed, how is it possible that, for example, the Italian electorate identifies with the Lega Nord’s *Popolo Padano*’ or with Berlusconi’s *Popolo della liberta*’? I believe that the voters are not so malleable or uncritical to simply sympathize with everything the political arena offers to them.

The post-Marxist political theorist Ernesto Laclau might help me to answer this question. Laclau’s work in fact focuses on analyzing how social agents “totalize”<sup>6</sup> the ensemble of their political experience and become exactly that unified ‘people’ that populism appeals to. In “On Populist Reason” (Laclau 2005) describes that populist leaders can articulate different social demands and transform them into a populist demand through discourse<sup>7</sup>. This implies that his understanding of populism doesn’t see it as a type of organization or ideology which can be compared with other types such as liberalism, communism, conservatism or socialism. He analyzes it as a dimension of political culture that can exist in movements of quite different ideologies<sup>8</sup>. It is a discursive technique that enables the articulation of different political claims in a popular one. Yet, how does it function?

Laclau explains that populist discourse divides society in two groups. In Italy, as we can see in the Lega Nord’s discourse, this means putting the ‘corrupt elite’ against the ‘ordinary taxpaying citizens’, the people. The latter is the ‘plebs’ a relatively excluded and undervalued part of the political community who are declared to be the only legitimate ‘populus’. The front that is produced between the elite and the people

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<sup>6</sup> For Laclau, the term “totalize” represents a homogenization process of singular social demands that constitute a “popular claim” (I will focus on this process more in the next pages).

<sup>7</sup> I refer here to Michel Foucault’s theorization of discourse as “a group of statements which provide a language for talking about – a way of representing the knowledge about – a particular topic at a particular historical moment. Discourse is about the production of knowledge through language. But since all social practices entail meaning, and meanings shape and influence what we do - our conduct – all practices have a discursive aspect” (Hall, 1997: 44).

<sup>8</sup> This research focuses on right wing populism due to the political centrality that it has obtained in several European countries in the last ten years. Yet, there are also interesting examples of left wing populist movements. In Latin America, for instance, Chavez or Cristina Kirchner or Evo Morales embody a political charisma typical of populist leaders. Their political discourses are based on the antagonism between a dominated or exploited class and the oligarchy, a propertied class. The contradiction between the people and the establishment is thus primarily articulated economically and not culturally, like in the right wing populist discourses.

through this technique is what Laclau calls the ‘internal frontier’. As Merijn Oudenampsen points out, the ‘internal frontier’ might be associated with the concept of the ‘democratic gap’ between citizens and representative politics (which sees the widening confidence gap between people and the political system as the reason for the rise of populism). However, he describes that Laclau’s concept wants to demonstrate an opposite causal relation: populism doesn’t reflect this gap, but actually it designs it (Oudenampsen 2010). Umberto Bossi, for example, has never missed the opportunity to promote an image of the Lega as the party that fights against the national parliament (even if it is part of it), depicted as corrupted or distanced from the ‘hard working’ and ‘honest people’ and the interests of “Padania”<sup>9</sup>.

Laclau’s analysis points out that society is not ‘totalizable’: it cannot be simplified into a series of social classes with defined demands or summed up in universal common denominators. Consequently, the confidence gap between people and the political system can never be definitively covered. For this reason, there is always the possibility that certain political demands cannot be satisfied, which produces political dissatisfaction. Laclau explains that as long as people’s dissatisfaction is expressed through singular political claims which don’t have any political dialogue within them, there is no possibility that a popular dissatisfaction is going to crystallize in a society. Yet, if a political discourse manages to create a connection between singular unfulfilled demands – the ‘chain of equivalence’ in Laclau’s theory – then there is ‘the populist moment’. Laclau defines it as the moment in which one of the unfulfilled demands nominates itself as a symbol for all of the other demands. Laclau thus describes populism as a discursive technique that connects and transforms different storylines in a symbolic slogan. It charges a person or an issue with a strong symbolic connotation.

In relying on Laclau’s conceptualization of discourse<sup>10</sup>, empty signifier<sup>11</sup> and rhetoric, this research might understand how it has been possible for the former communist

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<sup>9</sup> “Padania” is the name that Lega Nord created for the representation of the North as a mythical land whose inhabitants share economical interests and cultural traditions which are different and in contraposition to those of the rest of the Italian citizens. Being ‘padano’ becomes the positive sign of distinction, integrity, honesty

<sup>10</sup> By discourse Laclau means not only spoken and written discourse but any complex formation of elements in which relations play the constitutive role. By relations Laclau means that the elements do not pre-exist to the relational complex but they are constituted through it. In this regard, he relies on Saussure’s linguistic theory which explains that there are no positive terms in language, only differences that produce signifying elements.

<sup>11</sup> Relying on the Saussure’s analysis on the play of differences in language, Laclau develops the

working class people, Catholics, liberal entrepreneurs, as well as the conservative petit-bourgeois to identify exactly with ‘the people’ that right wing populism addresses its appeals to. My research will thus frame Italian right wing populism as a discursive manipulation of the institutional and political crisis that crossed Italy at the beginning of the nineties<sup>12</sup>. We will see in the next chapter that, due to the rise of unsatisfied demands among the electorate after the collapse of the ‘First Republic’, Berlusconi and Bossi have been able to connect and condense these demands through political discourse and give form to a broader popular subjectivity: the *Popolo Padano* and the *Popolo della Libertà*. Ambiguous symbols and concepts have been used for this purpose. The term ‘freedom’ became the empty signifier for Berlusconi’s political discourse and the symbol of his ‘political frontier’. In fact, since his entry into politics, the Italian Prime Minister has been able to create an antagonism between the ‘we’ of all the good Italians, successful and hard workers and defenders of national values, whose political freedom is under threat by the ‘they’, composed of the traditional communist and socialist parties, the trade unions, bureaucrats, immigrants, left-wing intellectuals, who have been depicted as the main people responsible for the political and economical problems of the Italian society. Thanks to this populist strategy, the first party of Berlusconi, ‘Forza Italia’, experienced such an upsurge in the electoral campaign that in 1994 it became the biggest political party in the country.

In reading Laclau’s work, I understand that populism is not so much about giving voice to the will of the people. It is more about giving form to ‘the people’ and ‘the will of the people’. This enables me to distance myself from several political theorists who have read Italian populism as a temporary expression of ‘popular discontent’ or a mere ideology or anti-political expression (Fella and Ruzza 2009; Pellizzetti 2009; Tullio 1989).

On the contrary, the success of populist formations is better understood when taking in consideration their capacity of envisioning a clear political antagonism, which activates a process of collective identification through political discourses, emotions

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meaning of the ‘empty signifier’. If the signification of discourses cannot be represented with a positive term, we need to look at each individual act of signification, focusing on the play of differences and which of them assumes the representation of the ‘totality’ (the signification). It carries universal signification and become the ‘empty signifier’.

<sup>12</sup> In this period, facts like ‘Tangentopoli’ (briberies scandals), the collapse of the mayor Italian Parties (the Communist, the Christian Democrats and the Socialist) and the influence of neo-liberal economics in politics, have contributed to the transformation of the political system in Italy. This process will be deeply analyzed in the next chapter.

and symbolism. Populism's symbolic politics in fact revolves around the appropriation and politicization of cultural symbols. As long as the people recognize themselves in the symbols, images, languages that populism proposes to them, then the possibility that they will embrace the corresponding ideological view becomes greater.

Ideology thus plays an important role in politics. It recruits people through stories and images used to fit people's everyday world into certain interpretive political frameworks by representing concrete situations. The experience of populist movements thus opens a breach in the hegemony of liberal democracy discourse in politics. The political theorist Fukuyama's leitmotif (doesn't work in English...) of the 'post-Cold War' time is now in crisis. We are not facing the 'end of ideology' (Fukuyama 1992).

What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such... That is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government. (Fukuyama 1992: 5)

I propose then that the liberal idea of politics that citizens-electors are rational agents who maximize their interests through consensus and deliberation – implies the dismissal of the importance of 'affective dimension' in politics (Mouffe 2005). The people instead are moved by desires, emotions, passions which are extremely relevant for the construction of collective identities<sup>13</sup>. Right wing populism has understood the stake these features play in the process of political identification.

In Italy, Silvio Berlusconi and Umberto Bossi have exploited historical myths, hegemonic gender patterns of Italian culture, and the fascination for charismatic leaders to construct their political force and their populist imaginary<sup>14</sup>.

The analyses considered above will constitute the main arguments in support of my main hypothesis: Italian populism is gendered. This means that in the creation of 'the

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<sup>13</sup> In this regard, the research relies on the theoretical insights of some Marxist or post-Marxist thinkers (Althusser 1969, Hall 1997, Howarth and Norval and Stavrakakis 2000, Mouffe 2005, Gramsci 1948-1951) who have criticized the liberal theories of political representation in which the will of the people is seen as something that is constituted before the representation.

<sup>14</sup> I will take in consideration studies on fascism and other Italian populist movements (Belpoliti 2009, Tarchi 2003) to verify what are the continuities and discontinuities with the contemporary populist leaders. In particular I will focus on the role of political charisma in Italian politics and the fascination might have citizens towards authoritarian leaders (Sontag 1980, Spackman 1996, Gundle 1998, Cavalli 1998).

people', Italian populist leaders' political discourse has deployed specific gender representations and imaginaries to recruit voters. Italian populism might be a significant case study of how populism and gender politics have been intertwined and how populism promotes different, even contradictory, gendered practices.

To conclude, in considering populism as a discursive phenomenon, I will engage in a post-Marxist theoretical debate on political theory and combine it with a feminist post-structuralist approach which will focus specifically on the role of gender in identity construction<sup>15</sup>. It is worth noting that both schools have based their epistemology on the dismissal of liberal ideology, unveiling the power relations produced by neo-liberal capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy. These are approaches that I will keep as a political and ethical guide for my investigation.

The next chapter analyzes the different feminist theoretical accounts that the research will take in account in order to investigate which gender patterns and identities Italian right wing populism adopts so as to appeal to the 'ordinary people'.

## **1.2 Feminist Theory: femininity, masculinity and the body in collective and national identity.**

This research treats populism as a discursive formation and argues that knowledge of populism may be gained not through classifying the ideological elements or ideas that circulate in it, but rather through an analysis of the way in which it binds together heterogeneous elements. It consequently aims at investigating if gender, as a product of institutionalized discourses on masculinity and femininity<sup>16</sup>, might be one of the main nodes of populism's articulation. This means that the construction of the populist 'people' might be a gendered articulation.

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<sup>15</sup> It refers here in specific to sexual difference theory that has given an important contribution to the deconstruction of the humanist idea of a fixed subjectivity, especially through Lacan's account. Psychoanalysis indeed has conceptualized subjectivity as a process that links the material (the reality) and the symbolic (language) features that constitute it (Braidotti 1998). In this theoretical frame, the deconstruction of essential identities is the result of acknowledging the contingency and ambiguity of every identity.

<sup>16</sup> Sexual difference theorists explain the construction of femininity (and masculinity) as determined by cultural, social and unconscious processes such as identification and internalization. This construction implies a process of embodiment where the coded roles are internalized and mediated through discursive practices and representations. Rosi Braidotti describes 'femininity' and 'masculinity' as "a set of social conventions and a set of social, legal, medical and other discourses about a normal, standardized female or male type". (Braidotti, 1998: 203)

I acknowledge that gender, especially notions of masculinity and femininity carry important connotations in relation to political behaviors, images and practices. For this reason, my research will rely on the theoretical debate (Mosse 1985, Anthias and Yuval Davis 1989, Yuval Davis 1997, McClintock 1997) which has pointed out that gender relations are at the heart of the cultural construction of social and collective identities and of the construction of nations as ‘imagined communities’ (Anderson 1983).

“The representation of male national power depends on the prior creation of gender difference... Nationalism is thus constituted from the very beginning as a gendered discourse and cannot be understood without a theory of gender power” (McClintock 1997: 90).

Taking in account studies of national identities might result in an effective strategy for investigating populism for a few reasons. Historically European right wing populisms have blended their political claims with nationalist or separatist causes and have tapped into xenophobic attitudes shared by significant sections of the public. Furthermore, right wing populism and nationalism share the main ideological investment in building a popular unity. This unity is determined by cultural representations whereby people come to imagine a shared experience, one in which they can identify with an extended collectivity. Several feminists have underlined that this process of identification is based on social, racial, and gender differences which are discursively invented and performed. This research will show how in the history of the Italian Republic, female representations have been symbolically used to define national power and the exclusion/inclusion of women and migrants as political subjects. ‘Miss Padania’ will constitute an example of recruiting women as political ‘bearers of collectivities’ (Yuval Davis 1997). To analyze the role of women in the construction of national and then populist identities the research relies on Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias’ work (1989). They describe five major ways in which women have been represented and interpellated by nationalism: first, as biological reproducers of the boundaries of national collectivities’ members.; second as the reproducers of the boundaries of national groups (through restrictions on sexual or marital relations); third as active transmitters and producers of national culture; fourth as symbolic signifiers of national differences; fifth as active participants in national struggles (Yuval- Davis and Anthias 1989: 7). The research will make visible these



aspects in Italy and in the rest of Europe where, for right wing populisms, nationalism becomes a recurrent discourse which aims to create a unity around an imaginary community that is male, white and Christian (Braidotti and Griffin 2002).

The imaginary community that populism and nationalism appeal to becomes material, real, tangible through the people's identification with the leader's political charisma. In particular, the leader's gendered and racialized corporeality plays a significant role in fomenting political unity. The politically seductive power of Silvio Berlusconi, Umberto Bossi, Geert Wilders and Jorg Haider derives also from the gestures, the masculinities, the bodily expressions that those leaders embody<sup>17</sup>. For this reason, I will analyze the 'body' as a synchronic 'representation' of the national and populist daily rituals and as a medium of culture (Boni 2008, Young 1992, Bourdieu 1977, Foucault 1980). This approach enables me to explore the mediatic representation of the body of the Prime Minister Berlusconi and other right wing politicians as reflections of the practices and the "disciplines on the body"<sup>18</sup> (Bordo 1989) that those politicians have been subjected to. Plastic surgery and the obsessive attention to diets, make-up and dress have characterized the daily life of Berlusconi and other right wing politicians. These will be read through two different approaches in understanding the body. On one hand, the body becomes a 'project' (Bourdieu 1977), a physical capital that the individual can use as a self-entrepreneurial tool in neo-liberal capitalism. On the other hand, the body is deeply etched by an ideological construction of normative masculinity and femininity. Consequently, the Prime Minister's body will be considered as a 'social construction' (metaphor of Italian culture) and as a 'political project' (intentional work on himself for self entrepreneurial goals).

Moreover, the research will investigate the ideological intervention of Berlusconi's populism in the standardization of femininity's representation in Italian media, politics and culture. The research in fact acknowledges that in the last 20 years the female body's representations have been hyper-sexualized on TV, in newspapers and in advertisements during Berlusconi's governments. This phenomenon might be

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<sup>17</sup> In this regard, there are several studies on the role of the body in the seductive power of political leaders. *Il corpo mediale del leader nell. Rituali del potere e sacralita' del corpo nell'epoca della comunicazione* by Boni (Maltemi, Roma 2002). Oliver Geden *The discursive representation of masculinity in the freedom Party of Austria (FPO)*" is also of interest.

<sup>18</sup> Susan Bordo uses this expression to underline that through the organization and the regulation of the time, space and movements of people's daily lives, the bodies are trained, shaped and impressed with the stamp of prevailing historical forms of selfhood, desire, masculinity and femininity.

analyzed as an attempt of right wing politics to normalize, homogenize and oppress the female body and reassert existing gender power relations challenged by the feminist gains of the 70s. This can be seen as a kind of ‘backlash’ (Faludi 1991) that reasserts existing gender configurations in Italian society. But this analytical frame is insufficient if this analysis takes in consideration women like the Minister of Equal Opportunities Mara Carfagna and the European parliamentarian Barbara Matera<sup>19</sup> who declare having achieved empowerment by becoming entrepreneurs of their image, buying into standardized femininities and using bodies as political tools within the parameters of neo-liberal consumption. For this reason, the Italian case will be positioned in the debate on post-feminism which involves Italian and international feminists in order to understand post-feminist female actors (Dominjanni 2009, Pitch 2009, Mc Robbie 2004, Genz 2006, Snyder 2008)

The next paragraph will describe the theoretical frame that this research applies to analyzing the relation between media and political communication. This will help to understand how the Prime Minister Berlusconi is the most important actor in the ‘mediatization’ of Italian democracy.

### **1.3 Political Communication Studies: the role of the media in populism.**

We cannot fully grasp populism as a mature political phenomenon in Europe today without a critical approach on the role played by media in contemporary society. In analyzing how populist leaders like Pim Fortuyn, Geert Wilders and Silvio Berlusconi could appeal to a broad spectrum of the population without the support of a consolidated party machine, the media become an important part of the puzzle. In this regard, the research will rely on political communication studies that developed the concept of ‘mediatization’ of democratic politics (Boni 2008, Ginsborg 2004, Mazzoleni 2003, Sartori 2000). This refers to the way the performance and communication of politics have been affected by the rise of mass media since the end of the nineteenth century. The media occupy a pivotal position within the political environment, gaining a significant role in most political events: election campaigns,

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<sup>19</sup> Mara Carfagna and Barbara Matera are two members of Berlusconi’s party “Il Popolo della Libertà”. They became known to Italian public opinion through their careers on TV as show-girls and participants of Miss Italia, the national beauty contest broadcasted every year on public television since 1939.

national and international celebrations, government communication, public diplomacy and image building. The media's central place in political processes has caused significant changes: on one hand, politicians have 'mediatized' themselves by adapting to the communication, language, style of journalistic formats, news values, 'infotainment'<sup>20</sup>. On the other hand, individual citizens are more dependent on mass media for their awareness of political affairs.

The concept of the 'mediatization' of politics allows me to frame the rise of Berlusconi's populism as a consequence of his being not only the owner of a media empire but also a product of it. Berlusconi's media companies have been the main vehicles for the diffusion of his political propaganda, but they have also been the source from which he built his political practice. For example, he adopted the style of advertisement in his political discourse, he constructed an image of himself based on marketing statistics and revalued the power of television's images in political communication.

In acknowledging the ongoing process of the 'mediatization' of politics, I point out the significant role of mass media in people's experience of political reality. As many scholars have pointed out (Pollock 2003, Hall 1997, Gledhill 1997), the mass media don't only accomplish the activity of representing reality. The media create and reproduce desires, different feelings and emotions. They perform a sort of mythical function in contemporary society, taking the characteristics of ritual, or a 'bardic function' (Van Zoonen 1994) which transforms reality or dominant ideology into 'common sense'.

Such accounts are extremely significant for populism. If populism is a discursive formation, media narrations and images have a pivotal role in the populist articulation of 'the people's voice. For example, televisions and newspapers have deeply influenced the perception of social security within European citizens. They often gave echo to episodes of violence and criminality, especially when immigrants are responsible. Such media representation has facilitated significantly the right wing populist's discursive construction of the antagonism between the 'we', the local 'hard worker' people, and the 'they', the immigrants. In Italy, the media emphasis on the criminalization of immigrant communities has been an important element in the rise of the populist

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<sup>20</sup> Demers David defines infotainment as: "information-based media content or programming that also includes entertainment content in an effort to enhance popularity with audiences and consumers." (in *Dictionary of Mass Communication and Media Research: a guide for students, scholars and professionals*" Marquette, 2005, p.143.)

party 'Lega Nord'. The daily television images of boats full of illegal migrants reaching the coast of Sicily, have enforced the credibility of the Lega Nord populist discourse: 'Let's stop the invasion of illegals'.

In conclusion, in exploring the role that gender plays in Italian populist discourses, it is important to consider the feminist analyses on gender and media communication (Zapperi 2009). Such contributions provide a deep understanding of the varied roles of the media in the construction of gender in contemporary societies. The main theoretical results are that firstly, the relation between gender and communication is primarily a cultural one. Secondly, that media discourses often produce representations of submissive women and standardized femininities.

In acknowledging the pivotal role of media in the rise of populism, this research will explore how Italian media (newspapers, tabloids, political and advertisement posters, television) have influenced the codification of a certain representation of 'gender'. In this regard, might there be a correlation between television programmes like "Uomini e Donne"<sup>21</sup> (Men and Women) or reality-shows like "Big Brother" and the construction of Berlusconi's virile masculinity?

#### **1.4 Method matters: discourse analysis and politics.**

Research questions in the field of gender, culture, media and politics can be approached with a variety of research methods and a range of data gathering and analysis techniques. Due to the specific theme of my research that focuses on the social construction of gender in cultural and media practices in Italian populism, I will use discourse analysis as my method for this particular research. The goal of this method is in fact to analyze how humans experience, define and organize, and appropriate reality. It implies an inductive method that reaches empirical understanding and explanations of social phenomena (Hartsock 1983, Mouffe 1993, Frazer 1997).

Discourse analysis is not just one approach, but a series of interdisciplinary approaches that can be used to investigate several different social domains in many

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<sup>21</sup> Uomini e Donne is a Mediaset program. The goal of the show is to create couples that possibly will be linked for life. Each season is named the "tronista", after the man or woman who is looking for a mate. He/she sits on a throne and there are different candidates one of whom the 'tronista' will select after a period of 4 months. In this reaserch I will see how Berlusconi behaves as the 'tronista' of Italian politics.

different types of studies. Different perspectives offer their own suggestions about what discourses are or how to analyze them. But, in many cases, there is a general consensus about a preliminary definition of discourse as *a particular way of talking about and understanding the world (or an aspect of the world)* (Jørgensen and Louise 2002: 2). The work of Foucault has also played a central role in the development of discourse analysis through both theoretical work and empirical research. In fact the majority of contemporary discourse analytical approaches follow Foucault's conception of discourses as sets of statements which impose limits on what gives meaning.

We shall call discourse a group of statements in so far as they belong to the same discursive formation [...Discourse] is made up of a limited number of statements for which a group of conditions of existence can be defined. Discourse in this sense is not an ideal, timeless form [...] it is, from beginning to end, historical – a fragment of history [...] posing its own limits, its divisions, its transformations, the specific modes of its temporality. (Foucault 1972: 117)

Discourse analytical approaches take as their starting point structuralist and poststructuralist linguistic philosophy's claim that the access to reality is always through language. With language, humans create representations of reality that are never mere reflections of a pre-existing reality but contribute to constructing reality. That does not mean that reality itself does not exist. Meanings and representations are real. Physical objects also exist, but they only gain meaning through discourse (Silverman 1983)

This research will apply a specific discourse analytical approach: Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's discourse theory. They elaborated this approach during their teaching at in the Department of Government at the University of Essex. It is a method that brings together recent developments in critical theory, including post-structuralism, post-Marxism, psychoanalysis, and contemporary linguistic philosophy in order to provide alternative means of understanding and explaining central contemporary social and political problems.

Since I am using Laclau's theoretical framework to analyse populism, the choice for the discourse analysis approach of Laclau and Mouffe is quite a logical one, they share a similar set of ontological and epistemological assumptions.

Laclau and Mouffe's approach has its starting point in the poststructuralist idea that discourse constructs the social world in meaning, and that, owing to the fundamental instability of language, meaning can never be permanently fixed. No discourse is a closed entity: it is, rather, constantly being changed through contact with other discourses. So a keyword of the theory is *discursive struggle*. Different discourses – each of them representing particular ways of talking about and understanding the social world – are engaged in a constant struggle with one other to achieve hegemony, that is, to fix the meanings of language in their own way. Hegemony, then, can provisionally be understood as the dominance of one particular perspective (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002: 6-7).

Such approach rejects automatically a rationalist account of politics, which has treated social agents as actors who act according to rationality and economic self-interest. It, thus, distinguishes between 'subject positions' and 'political subjectivity'<sup>22</sup> in order to point out the positioning of subjects within a discursive structure and at the same time account for the agency of the subject. This distinction supports me in my consideration that individuals are not homogenous with specific interests but can have a number of different 'subject positions'. This means that a subject can identify him/herself or be simultaneously positioned as 'middle class', 'Christian', 'woman' and 'white', and therefore there are different and multiple forms by which subjects are constituted as social actors. Such an account also enables me to investigate a social phenomenon focusing on power relations between social agents without having to essentially prioritize one element over the other (class, gender and race). Moreover, such methodological assumptions of discourse analysis allow the researcher to position herself in a specific political and historical context, rejecting a neutral location from which she evaluates and describes the data<sup>23</sup>.

The sources gathered by this research are several. Firstly, there are some articles by Italian newspapers "Repubblica", "Corriere della Sera", "Il Manifesto", "Il Giornale" (from 2008 to 2010), which relate with political opinions and representations of the right wing populist leaders. Secondly, I will analyze several political posters by Italian political parties (from 1948 to 2010) in order to see what kind of gender representations Italian politics privileges. Thirdly, I will discuss two

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<sup>22</sup> The concept of 'political subjectivity' here refers simply to the way that the individual consciously acts.

<sup>23</sup> This question is also very important for feminist theory: in fact, Donna Haraway's concept of 'situated knowledge' expresses the importance of location as an epistemological assumption..

films, “Videocracy” (2009) by Enrico Gandini and the documentary “Il Corpo delle Donne” (2009) by Lorella Zanardo. These movies contain a critical analysis of the power of media in the formation of Berlusconi’s populism. The two authors share my point of view that the relation between the image and desire, the image and gender identity, the image and sexuality are political issues at the heart of Berlusconi’s power. Applying discourse analysis to these sources will enable me to treat as ‘text’ political speeches, reports, manifestos, historical events, interviews, policies, ideals, institutions and other linguistic and non-linguistic data. It also allows the investigation on the discursive construction of populist and national identities in Italy and in Europe and the gender representations conveyed by Italian populism.

## ***2. The Rise and Consolidation of Italian Right Wing Populism***

Through an historical view of Italian 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century politics from fascism to nowadays, this chapter will delineate the continuities and discontinuities between contemporary and past experiences of populism in Italy. A special focus will be also given to the historical development (in the last twenty years) of the actual party system in Italy. Firstly, this will help to frame and clarify the actual political configuration and ideological position of populist right wing parties. Secondly, looking specifically at the Italian political identity crisis during the years of ‘Tangentopoli’ (1992-94), I will analyze how populist leaders have given form discursively to the political dissatisfaction inherent in the Italian electorate. In Laclau’s words, I will investigate the political events and discourses preceding the ‘populist moment’.

The next paragraphs will articulate the following question: What are the causes which can explain the success of Italian populism? This will be investigated in comparison to other European populist formations which have rarely reached governmental positions.

### **2.1 Tracing back the historical roots of Italian right populism.**

In the history of Italian politics, the appeal to ‘the people’ as unique and all embracing political subject is best known from the fascist regime (1922-1945). The ‘people’ were considered an ideal constituency that mirrored all the popular virtues and the heroism of the rural workers. The ‘Andare verso il popolo’ (going to the people) was a one of the main slogans of the regime and also the grand idea that informed its political actions. The image of Mussolini working in the wheat fields, at Borgo Montello in the July 1934 became a sort of icon of the fascist propaganda’s populist character (figure 1).





**1. Mussolini working in the wheat fields, at Borgo Montello, July 1934**

Since the beginning of his political career, Mussolini was an active promulgator of populist discourses. He criticized the political elite which was currently in government, condemning its ineptitude and distance from the people's aspirations to social justice. He also harshly ridiculed what he termed 'the bureaucrats' and 'the intellectuals'. When Mussolini was in power, he maximized his populism through direct contact with the crowd in the mass gatherings under the balcony of 'Palazzo Venezia' and during his appearances at openings of public (in the fascist rhetoric called 'popular') works.

Mussolini's exaltation of rural traditions, the integrity of the working class people, as well as his staging of rituals which aimed at a collective identification with fascist values, were instruments to deepen the Italian citizens' national identification. Fascism used such discourses in order to establish a union between the state and its people (ethnic Italians).

The fascist culture promoted an almost sanctified image of the 'Italian people', a stereotyped vision where the vices usually attributed to the lower classes – such as ignorance, impulsivity, superstition and diffidence – were transformed into providential virtues (Tullio-Altan 1989).

Although the personal relation between the leader and the crowd and the anti-elite stance were prominent features of Mussolini's regime, fascism cannot be considered an ideological and historical parallel of contemporary Italian populism. Tarchi (2003) argues that what constitutes the difference between contemporary populism and fascism is that the fascist ideology didn't embrace 'libertarian' political values, such as individualism and a limited role of the state in society. These features are something which Tarchi also sees as the main aspect of another Italian populist movement that rose after the Second World War: the 'Qualunquismo'. This movement was connected to the 'Fronte dell'Uomo', a weekly magazine founded in

the 1945 that became very popular in the years immediately after the war. The magazine was edited by Guglielmo Giannini, who was able to interpret the negative humors of some sectors of the Italian population. In particular the petit-bourgeoisie was living in difficult socio-economic conditions just after the war. The magazine represented these feelings through discourses depicting the ‘common person’ tired of the corruption and inefficiency of the political elite. The ‘Fronte dell’Uomo’ interestingly visualizes what it claims to be the ‘popular’ political stance of the time” (figure 2). The political elite, represented by the four hands that push down the press, is dispossessing a man, the common citizen, of what little money he has.



**2. ‘L’uomo qualunque’ poster, 1945 meeting, 1945**



**Guglielmo Giannini during a political meeting, 1945**

‘Abbasso tutti’ (down with everyone) is another famous Qualunquismo slogan that testifies to the fundamental political dissatisfaction expressed by this movement. It manifested as a vent against any kind of regime. Both democratic and fascist regimes were seen equally responsible for the exploitation of honest and laborious citizens.

What it is worth underlining is that this movement articulated a political discourse in which being part of the ‘common people’ implied honesty, and the harboring of a ‘natural’ antagonistic feeling towards the ruling class. In this regard, the ‘Qualunquismo’ represents a precursor to the Italian populist movements of the nineties, in particular the Lega Nord which attributed similar positive characteristics to a self-governing civil society. It is claimed that the ‘common people’ are of their

nature able to govern themselves, without being educated or represented by professional politicians.

In 1946 the 'Fronte dell'Uomo' ran for the local elections as a political party, obtaining notable successes in several cities of the Italian south. The political slogan was "Ne'a destra ne'a sinistra, ma avanti" (neither left nor right, but forward)<sup>24</sup>. After a few years in parliament, the political experience of Qualunquismo's leader Giannini ended due to infighting in the party. Political positions switched to more radical right and conservative claims. Notwithstanding a short appearance in the Italian party system, 'Qualunquismo' represents an important example of the appeal populist ideas and style had for a considerable part of the Italian population. Its political success in fact showed firstly the historical diffidence towards political parties by a large part of the Italian population, which is one of the causes of the electoral absenteeism today in Italy. Secondly, it demonstrates that a frontal attack against the entire political elite, in name of efficiency, honesty and experienced management of public services, can appeal transversally to the right and left wings. Contrary to the fascist regime, the 'Fronte dell'uomo' didn't deny the importance of representative democracy, but it wanted to decrease the power of the state, the political parties and the bureaucracy in favor of an administration more liberal in terms of fiscal policies and civil rights. Furthermore Giannini, in expressing these claims, embodied the role of a tutor, leader and speaker for the masses. This is a characteristic role typical for any populist phenomenon.

This brief analysis of 'Qualunquismo' should make it clear why Giannini and his movement – rather than fascism – constitute a more appropriate historical source toward understanding contemporary Italian populism. In the next paragraphs these similarities will become clearer.

Notwithstanding the continuities and discontinuities that characterize the different historical populist experiences in Italy until now, the political charisma<sup>25</sup> of

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<sup>24</sup> It is curious to find out that this slogan has been literary translated and used by the Dutch right wing populist politician Rita Verdonk: 'Niet links of rechts, maar recht door zee'. She is the leader of the right wing party 'Trots op Nederland' which has a racist stance toward Muslim migrants living in the Netherlands.

<sup>25</sup> In political theory many authors have dismissed the concept of charisma as inappropriate for the analysis of liberal democracy, considering it rather as a non-rational element of pre-democratic phenomena. (Cavalli 1998, Pappas 2007). This research instead reinstates charisma as a political term or category which is still alive and significant if we mean to understand phenomena like neo-populism, social movements, et cetera. I rely on Bourdieu's definition of charisma as a situation of delegation that involves a social group bestowing power on its authorized representative in order for the latter to set the

the leader, as a key aspect of the mobilization of great masses of people, is the element that connects Italian contemporary populism with the past movements described above. From Mussolini to Berlusconi, the personalization of the relation between leader and the crowd has been a significant element of their political experience. This happened because in time of political crisis, when everybody felt their own individual impotence in the face of national political institutions, the leader became the shaper and bearer of social expectation and of collective hope. It is in this context that the cult of the leader's personality spread within the masses. The leader has transfigured into an image of an extraordinary power which, in the Italian populist cases, attracts solemn dedication and devotional homage. This is supported by myths, rituals and symbols which reconstruct the leader's life in accordance with an heroic role. The continuity between fascism and contemporary Italian right wing populism, emerges thus in exploring that Italian citizens have considered such political charismatic figures as saviors of the nation in crisis, even as a sort of quasi-religious 'messiah'<sup>26</sup>. (Cavalli 1998, Gundle 1998, Poli 1998)

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rules of the political game and make the group (Bourdieu 1985).

<sup>26</sup> The experience of Catholic domination has been an important factor in conditioning perceptions of powerful leaders and in the cult of political personalities in Italy (Cavalli 1998). Catholic culture must be specifically mentioned as conducive to a collective expectation of the arrival of an extraordinary leader. The figures of Jesus and Virgin Mary as well as the cult of the Saints have developed a popular faith in powerful women and men. Furthermore, the Pope also has a role to play in this regard. For the believers, he is a charismatic figure not only because he is the head of the Catholic Church but also for the fact that he is the most influential messenger of Jesus's words.



The Roman Empire's 'fasces' became a symbol of the summary power and jurisdiction of fascism in Italy. In the poster this symbol reinforces the image of Mussolini as the powerful, authoritarian and glorious leader of Italy.



This is a bronze of Lictor BM Julio Claudian (Period-Roman, 20 BC- AD 20). The figurine depicts a lictor, one of the officials who accompanied the higher magistrates of the It symbolizes the power of the magistrates to impose either corporal punishment (with the rods) or capital punishment (with the axe).



Umberto Bossi during a political rally. His gesture (showing the middle finger) symbolizes the anti-conformist and rebellious charismatic personality of the Lega Nord's leader and followers. There is here a reminder of the burlesque coarseness typical of the characters of the 'Commedia dell'arte', whose 'Gioppino' is an important reference in the popular culture of North-Italy<sup>27</sup>.

<sup>27</sup> French anthropologist Lynda Dematteo's work *L'idiote en politique. Subversion et néo-populisme*, (CNRS editions) investigates Lega Nord's political language. She describes that the Lega Nord politicians have adopted the coarse and popular language of the "Commedia dell'arte" and its masks in politics. In this way they have been able to disguise their own cunning by popular coarseness. Gioppino is a mask. He represent a man working as a porter and farmer. He speaks a coarse language but he looks a good man. He always carries a stick which he does not hesitate to use to defend the reason of the ppoest and oppressed.



In this poster Silvio Berlusconi becomes the symbol of Italy. The ‘people’ are thanking him for his political achievements. The right wing leader’s bodily gesture – hands open – resembles Catholic gestural symbolism.

In the next paragraph, the socio-political conditions that made the emergence of charismatic leaders such as Berlusconi and Bossi in Italy possible will be explored. I will also give attention to the political myths and symbols they personify for the Italian electorate.

## **2.2 From the ‘First Republic’ to the ‘Second Republic’: the new right wing coalition and its political legitimacy.**

My analysis of Italian populism focuses on how the right wing has been able to redefine the political space and construct new political identities during the passage from the ‘First Republic’ (1945-1993) to the ‘Second Republic’ (1994 to present) and later, during the governments of Berlusconi. At the centre of this exploration is the analysis of the particular historical context in which right wing populism emerged and developed.

Since the post-war period until the nineties, the Italian political system has been characterized by a situation where one party, the ‘Democrazia Cristiana’ (Christian Democrats), remained permanently in government. Italy had a sort of ‘blocked political system’ without any alternation in government.

The proportional electoral system required that the DC generally ruled in coalition with other smaller parties. From the sixties on, the DC and the ‘Partito Socialista Italiano’ (Italian Socialist Party) have been in power, jointly governing Italy

until 1994. Two political phenomena developed during this long period: *'lottizzazione'* (the spoils system) and *'partitocrazia'* (partitocracy). The sharing of spoils meant that key posts of the Italian public sector were distributed solely among the ruling parties at the beginning of the nineties.

The political parties, after colonizing the public administration through an articulated network of state interventions, extended their action to civil society. They managed to acquire and maintain their political support through the construction of specific subcultures, in which political loyalty was rewarded through employment in the public state sector or by guaranteeing lucrative contracts for the construction of public infrastructures or services.

Corruption involved entrepreneurs funding political parties in exchange for state contracts and other business-related favors. Clienteles involved political parties funding citizens (jobs, privileges, undeserved benefits) in exchange for votes. Thus political parties were at the centre of the flow of transactions. The precondition that makes everything else possible is de facto continuous control and possession of the state by the ruling parties. (Sasson 1995:135-36, quoted in Ruzza and Fella 2009: 19)

In the beginning of the nineties the *'partitocrazia'* crashed down due to the political crisis characterized by the *'tangentopoli'* (briberies) scandals and the adoption of a majoritarian electoral system (1993). Several politicians within the DC and PSI parties were arrested due to corruption and bribery. The *'Mani Pulite'* (Clean Hands) investigation uncovered a series of corrupt arrangements whereby private and public companies financed politicians and their parties in exchange for favors such as changes in some specific legislation and the awarding of public contracts. *'Mani Pulite'* magistrates led the arrest of 2000 people and the investigation of the most powerful politicians, such as the socialist leader Bettino Craxi and the Christian democratic politicians Giuliano Andreotti and Antonio Forlanini.

The years 1992-94 thus saw the collapse of the ruling political parties and the rise of new political forces. The right wing in particular saw a transformation and the creation of new political figures. One of the parties that benefited from the *'Mani Pulite'* inquiry was the radical right wing party *'Movimento Sociale Italiano'* (Italian Social Movement), which had been the heir of the Fascist Party after the second world war. It demonstrated its exemption from the corruption and clientelism adopted by

the other old parties of the 'First Republic'. The MSI was thus able to present itself as the immaculate opponent of the political system ruled by the DC-PSI. In 1994 the political leader of the MSI, Gianfranco Fini, understood the necessity of challenging the political isolation that has characterized the right wing party since its foundation (1946). He saw the advantage of transforming his party from a neo-fascist political movement (in the eighties Fini was still proclaiming the need for a return to the values of fascism and Mussolini) to a national conservative actor. Fini therefore proclaimed the constitution of 'Alleanza Nazionale' (National Alliance), a sort of electoral front that gathered the MSI and other radical right wing smaller groups. The MSI took political leadership within this electoral front.

In 1991 the Italian right wing saw the rise of a new political party, the 'Lega Nord' (North League). This party was the unification of the different 'Leagues' born in the North of Italy, such as 'Lega Veneta' and 'Lega Lombarda' which had previously been political movements claiming regional autonomy<sup>28</sup>. In the eighties, issues of economic and cultural regionalism began to gain political voice in some areas of the North. The corruption and the inefficiency of the central state bureaucracy was a particular point of grievance. The Lega Nord became the political expression of the inequitable redistribution of resources between the North and South of Italy. Umberto Bossi, Lega Nord's political leader, structured his political platform with examples from 'Leghe Autonomiste' (autonomist leagues). Their demands were based on reviving local ethnic identities as expressions of political sovereignty.

In 1994, contemporaneously with the creation of the Alleanza Nazionale election front, Silvio Berlusconi entered politics at the head of his personal creation 'Forza Italia' (Forward, Italy). Berlusconi's choice to form his own political party was influenced by the circumstances of the political crisis. Due to the collapse of the 'First Republic' political system, he was afraid of a possible electoral victory by the centre left coalition which could have been an obstacle to his career as a media mogul. Berlusconi feared that this new political environment could be antagonistic toward his business interests in general and in particular toward his media empire's dominance over Italy's private television broadcasts. Berlusconi had benefited from his close relationship with the Christian democrats and socialist parties' political elites, all of whom were brought down by the 'Mani Pulite' investigation. In particular, he was a

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<sup>28</sup> Other small political groupings in the North gathered in the Lega Nord: Piemont Autonomista, Union Ligure, Lega Emiliano-Romagnolo, Alleanza Toscana.



close friend of Bettino Craxi, leader of the PSI and prime minister between 1983 and 1988. Berlusconi benefited from this friendship because Craxi helped him secure his hold over Italy's private television broadcasting. Following the 'Tangentopoli' scandals Craxi escaped from Italian justice and died in exile in Tunisia. Berlusconi thus saw his political alliances crashing down (Ginsborg 2005). After this political event, Berlusconi decided to enter politics, creating his own party 'Forza Italia' and consolidating his electoral alliances with the LN in the North and with AN in the South. Political alliances were also created with the Christian Democratic Centre (party born after the collapse of the DC) and the former Liberal Union of the Centre.

Berlusconi used his media empire to emphasize the imagined perils of communism in the political system. He has depicted the oppositional party, 'Partito della Sinistra' (Party of the Left), as a communist party, despite the fact that PDS had shed both its communist name and identity a few years earlier. In the run-up to elections Berlusconi described the electoral contest as a choice between liberty (his coalition) and communist totalitarianism (centre-left parties).

Thanks to the financial and propaganda resources of Berlusconi's media empire, the right wing coalition won the general election in the 1994 and Forza Italia became the leading party in Italy with 21 per cent of the vote. LN obtained 8.4 per cent of the national vote and AN 13.5 per cent (Ruzza and Fella 2009). In May 1994 Berlusconi formed a new government with these new and re-invented political parties, attracting several critiques. The inclusion of the 'neo-fascists' into the government of a modern European democracy was indeed criticized. The inclusion of LN also attracted several polemics because the party had previously attacked the unity of the Italian state and had run on an anti-southern stance.

The coalition between Forza Italia, AN and LN was extremely fragile and it indeed lasted only eight months. Umberto Bossi, the Lega Nord's leader, never stopped attacking Berlusconi's conflict of interests as a politician and as an owner of a media empire. The difficulties that LN had in reconciling its populist features with the demands of democratic government also led to the coalition's collapse. A few months later, the corruption investigation by the 'Mani Pulite' magistrates also involved the Prime Minister Berlusconi. Consequently, the right wing government resigned.

Notwithstanding that the governing experience of the right wing coalition was short and did not garner credibility for Berlusconi, the right wing was able to consolidate a strong political position during the 5 years it was in the opposition.

The individual right wing parties accentuated their populist rhetoric and programmes in order to attract more potential supporters. In this period the LN promoted a secessionist stance, supporting the independence of the northern part of Italy, called 'Padania', and reinforced its anti-establishment image in order to attract the same popular mobilization it enjoyed before 1994. By the end of the 1998, this radical separatist position however obtained (only) a limited support among the LN activists and consequently the issue was gradually phased out. The LN invested in anti-European Union discourses and combined them with anti-immigration rhetoric, for the satisfaction of the anti-cosmopolitan sentiments of its activists (Ruzza and Fella 2009).

After the first Berlusconi government, Fini continued the process of transforming his neo-fascist party into a conservative democratic one. His aim was to consolidate the party's new-found legitimacy and try to be part of the centre-right coalition. Thus, the MSI had to drop the anti-system discourse and the fascist nostalgia and adopt policy positions which could be associated with the conservative right. In January 1995, at the Fiuggi Congress, this process of re-organization led Fini to reform the MSI into the 'Alleanza Nazionale'. It hence became a proper party as opposed to an electoral movement. The new party gave an impression that it had had a fundamental break with its fascist past, and that it could be a viable partner in the birth of a modern European centre-right party.



Political poster during the MSI years with G. Fini giving the fascist salute.



Picture made in 2003 when Fini went to Israel. By this trip he wanted to dismiss his fascist political background.

The period from 1995 to 2001 also witnessed an internal re-organization of Berlusconi's party. It tried to expand its territorial roots and the number of party members. However, it remained completely dominated by its leader.

Despite the failed experience in government in 1994 and the corruption investigation, Berlusconi was able to improve his own reputation by depicting himself as a victim of a politically biased judicial plot and as having been denied his rightful chance to govern through political betrayal (Ginsborg 2005). Furthermore, his political career was rehabilitated also thanks to the PDS political leader, Massimo D'Alema, who invited Berlusconi into a bicameral parliamentary commission for the purpose of bringing constitutional reforms. This new institutional role allowed Berlusconi to present himself as respectable leader of an opposition party.

In 2001 the centre right wing won the general election thanks to its ability to capitalize on the popular dissatisfaction due to the performance of the centre left which governed from 1996 to 2001. The electoral campaign was characterized by Berlusconi's capacity for attracting popular attention to his personal career and economic successes. In particular, this was reflected in the '*Una Storia Italiana*' (an Italian Story), a book on Berlusconi's life. It was mailed to millions of Italian households, collecting images and short descriptions as a sort of Prime Minister's biography. Berlusconi's political persuasion had been strategically also inserted in television programming; the TV-programme 'Porta a Porta' (door to door) showed the Prime Minister signing his 'Patto con l'Italia' (contract with the Italian people) live on television. The contract committed Berlusconi to respecting four out of five electoral goals within the 5-year parliamentary legislature. He promised that if he failed this contract, he would withdraw from the next election<sup>29</sup>.

The political programme of the right wing coalition that presented itself under the name 'Casa delle Liberta' (Freedom's House), focused on firstly, the devolution of health, education and policing sectors to the regions; secondly, restrictions on immigration law and the penalization of clandestine immigration; thirdly, privatizing the public commons and market liberalization; fourthly, simplifying bureaucratic legislation for entrepreneurs and business companies.

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<sup>29</sup> Berlusconi did not respect this promise and in the 2006 national election he was the Prime Minister candidate of the right wing coalition. It is worth noting how Berlusconi's political actions were spectacularized through mass media, in particular the TV. The next chapter will focus on explaining this phenomenon by investigating the power of media in Berlusconi's political victory, and how he had been able to exploit the television to promote himself.

Since the spring of 2001 Berlusconi has governed for 5 years, becoming the first Prime Minister in the history of the Italian Republic to govern for an entire legislative period. This result was the consequence of the Prime Minister's capacity for mediating the different instances and political values of the two other members of the coalition, LN and AN.

In 2006 Berlusconi finished his mandate, and the left wing won the general election. During the left-wing government in the years 2006-2008, the right wing coalition invested its energies in mobilizing the electorate as concerns populist issues. The LN reaffirmed its general anti-immigration and xenophobic message, in particular promoting discourses of Islamophobia and attacking the Romanian community<sup>30</sup>. The AN also had a more aggressive message on immigration and refused multiculturalism as a model of society. Forza Italia instead concentrated its political attacks against the centre left coalition, denouncing it for controlling the most important political institutions, public TV networks and the judiciary (a rhetoric that is dominant in Berlusconi political discourses, as we shall see). Moreover, Berlusconi launched a new centre-right formation, the 'Partito della Libertà' (Party of Liberty), designed to unify Forza Italia and the AN. Fini joined the party and the PDL became the biggest right wing party of Italy. The creation of the PDL demonstrates Berlusconi's opportunistic skills and capacity to reinvent and restore freshness to his political project. Furthermore, he managed the PDL with the same centralistic and personalistic nature as Forza Italia, minimizing the style and the political programme developed by AN.

The LN joined the coalition with the new party PDL and in the general election of April 2008 Berlusconi became Prime Minister for the third time. This victory showed that since the nineties the majority of the Italian electorate had accepted the gradual drift of the AN and Lega Nord parties from the radical right to the centre right wing and was ready to consider them as legitimate democratic parties of the centre right coalition. This transformation represents one of the main elements which labels the Italian right wing as a 'laboratory of populism' in Europe. In fact, if we compare the right wing coalition in Italy with the conventional parties of the European centre right, the PDL and in particular the LN's political discourses mirror a xenophobic populism that is typical, for example, of the Dutch 'Partij voor de

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<sup>30</sup> After the Romanian entrance into the European Union, the Romanians could enter Italy freely. The Italian media were focusing on criminal acts involving them

Vrijheid’, the ‘British National Party’, Le Pen’s ‘Le Front National’, the Flemish ‘The Vlaams Belang’, which are considered radical right parties by their country’s public opinion and political scientists<sup>31</sup>.

In the Italian political context, this anomaly finds its reason in Bossi and Berlusconi’s capacity of depicting themselves as ‘outsiders’ to the old political parties. They emphasise that they have never been connected with radical Italian right movements. They in fact promote neo-liberal stances, such as the privatization of state companies and public services, which are policies ideologically opposite to the preferences of Italian neo-fascist followers. Moreover, Lega Nord and Forza Italia have also been able to occupy the political position of the traditional right Christian Democrats and co-opt some of the stances of Fini’s conservative party. This has enabled them to attract and interpret political expectations from a variegated sector of the Italian electorate.

In Italy the return of populism thus doesn’t present itself as a nostalgic neo-fascist resurgence but rather as a product of new political tensions. As Tarchi (2003) explains in his work, the reason for the growth of populism in Italy, and in the rest of Europe, is not connected with fascist traditions or values – the cult of authority, the anti-Jewish prejudice, or nationalism characterized by the will of expansionism. It is instead linked to the fact that part of the European public opinion manifests a increasing feeling of hostility towards immigrants, a revaluation of national pride, a nationalist defensive stance against the invasion of international capital, commodities, foreigners, a preoccupation for individual and collective security, as well as anger toward the inefficiency of bureaucratic structures.

Consequently, the success of parties like the Lega Nord, the Front National, the Fpö, the Danske Folkeparti, the list Pim Fortuyn, the Wilders’ PVV derives in fact from their capacity of exploiting the new fears and political insecurities of many European citizens and creating a right wing populist discourse. For this reason, they often depict themselves as a sort of vanguard of new antagonisms, interpreters of political struggles connected to the socio-economic fractures of contemporaneous Europe. They claim the beneficial effects of neo-liberal policies inside the state as well as minor state

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<sup>31</sup> It is worth specifying the different role of Gianfranco Fini today in this regard. Following recent Berlusconi legislatures, he has left behind his role as a conservative and xenophobic leader, opting instead for the part of a European liberal right wing politician towards migrant issues. He proposed in fact that regular migrants should be able to participate in the local administrative elections and get the Italian citizenship more rapidly.

intervention in the private economic sector. With regard to globalization, they have an isolationist stance in the trade market, and ask for increased border control of the flux of migrants who are painted as something which can threaten the cultural integrity of the local community.

The European new right formations thus converge in a frontal attack on the political and cultural establishment that has characterized the nineties around the contraposition between the liberal-conservative and social democratic coalitions. The populist formations in fact are born also as a consequence of the erosion of the ideological subcultures consolidated after the Second World War in each country, and of the collapse of the social institutions supporting traditional collective identities. For this reason, their representation as a new political vanguard that protects the interests of the ‘common people’ became more vivid and credible, especially considering that the left wing has been absent or incapable of articulating a new political vocabulary, different strategies and actions to face the socio-economic transformation that took place in the European level during the same time. In this regard, it is possible to understand that right wing populist movements get support from the alienation that has invested working class people, who are more affected by the negative effects of global capitalism and financial crisis. This explains why there is a further ‘proletarianization’ of the populist electorate, and why Lega Nord and the French Front National are the parties that get more support from working class people in Italy and in France (Tarchi 2003).

Given that in Europe populism might be a response of the international and social and economical tensions of the late 80s and early 90s, what are the socio-political factors which have facilitated the political rise of Berlusconi and Bossi’s populism?

### **2.3 “Tangentopoli”, neo-liberalism and migration: new political antagonism.**

In the most recent and exhaustive work on the Italian right wing, Ruzza and Fella (2009) explain that the success of the Italian right is rooted in the impact of migration and a crisis of political identity, which has pushed several voters, previously attached to mainstream parties, to embrace the right. This process has involved the exploitation of the public’s feelings of fear and frustration to reframe ideological discourses. In Italy, after the ‘tangentopoli’ scandals, society was dealing with an

increased globalization of the economy and labor flexibilization, reducing the power of the trade unions and social solidarity<sup>32</sup>. To a certain extent this made the ideological and organizational model of the mass party like the DC and PCI anachronistic. The new populist formations like Forza Italia and Lega Nord were able to mobilize the electorate formerly connected with the traditional ideologies of the left and the right. How was this shift possible? Forza Italia approached the electorate in a new way, using the kind of communication typical of advertizing. In fact, Berlusconi considered the electorate as a group of consumers and not as ideologically crystallized voters, consequently his way of doing politics was less ideological and more pragmatic. In this way, Forza Italia was able to re-define the political space, and its populist discourses could appear as truly innovative compared to old political divides. Lega Nord instead reacted to social and cultural changes by providing a needed new sense of community through the creation of a new territorial collective identity, 'Il Popolo Padano'.

Furthermore, Ruzza and Fella explain that in 1993 there was another institutional development that determined a new political space for the right: the new majoritarian electoral law. It facilitated the breakdown of elite alliances, giving new opportunities for political outsiders to re-define political relations. Thus Berlusconi had the possibility to create and lead a broad right wing coalition involving parties that might have not been previously considered as properly democratic, such as Lega Nord and Alleanza Nazionale. Their inclusion in the centre-right coalition was depicted as necessary because the political system had polarized as a result of the majoritarian law.

Due to this new context the right innovated its political and cultural discourses by reviving an ideological antagonism already present in the Italian political arena. Italy has been historically 'a set of ideological conflict' (Ginsborg 2005) that has been traditionally fought by contrasting ideologies representing the political identities of entire social groups or sometimes regions. It's worth to mention the ideological differences that in the past characterized Christian Democratic Veneto and Lombardia (now Lega Nord strongholds), the leftist Emilia Romagna, Tuscany,

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<sup>32</sup> It is worth reading *Ragionare la globalizzazione* (ed) Giuseppe Scida' (Franco Angeli, Milan, 2003) for a better understanding of the consequences of economical globalization for Italian society., The book *Homo instabilis. Sociologia dell'instabilita* (ed) Mario Aldo Toscano (Jaca Book Spa, Milan, 2007), gives instead a broad analysis of the effects of labor market's flexibilization in Italy and in the crisis of the trade unions.

Umbria, Marche, and the conservative traditions of some southern regions. In spite of these socio-political historical affiliations, the ideologies representing the right and also the left have changed over time. Tracing back to the First Republic, the DC and PCI parties were the poles of the main ideological polarization in Italy. Through ideology<sup>33</sup>, these two parties fought against each other and created their own specific collective identity. However, they had also some ideological aspects in common: they were both in favor of state intervention in the economy; they were both anti-individualist in nature; their discourses were directed to subjects beyond the confines of the nation-state, which meant ‘the proletariat’ for the PCI and the entire religious community, the ‘people of god’, for the DC. The process of secularization (developed also thanks to the feminist movement in the 70s and 80s) led to the lessening of the political significance and attraction of both ideologies. In fact since 1968 on, the women’s movement has cross-fertilized with the student movement, and workers’ protests spread all around Italy as important protagonists in Italian politics<sup>34</sup>. Important victories in the field of civil rights, such as divorce and abortion’s legalization, the women’s acquisition of equal juridical status in family rights as well as the improvements in welfare state services (kindergarten, part-time jobs, maternity allowance) have significantly challenged Italian society and its political culture. Moreover, the feminist debate on sexuality, female subjectivity and the relation between patriarchy and capitalism (and communism) has in a way remarkably undermined the dogmatism of communist and catholic ideologies.

At the beginning of the nineties, the collapse of the communist block determined the demise of the PCI and undermined the presence of the Christian Democrat party to the effect that after the 1992-1993 it disappeared from the political scene. This collapse of the party system caused minor ideologies to gain in strength:

minor ideologies gained strength and pervaded the entire political system. The reflection of an international liberal turn, and of economic globalization made relevant

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<sup>33</sup> By ideology I mean “the mental frameworks – the languages, the concepts, categories, imagery of thought, and the systems of representation – which different classes and social groups deploy in order to make sense of, define, figure out and render intelligible the way society works”. (Hall 1997: 26)

<sup>34</sup> With regard to the history of the women movement in Italy, see *La memoria di lei. La storia delle donne, storia di genere* by Gabriella Zarri (SEI, Turin, 1996); *Essere uomo, essere donna. Storia sociale delle donne nell’eta’ contemporanea* (Laterza, Rome, 2001); “il Movimento delle donne” by Luisa Passerini in A. Agosti, L. Passerini, N. Tranfaglia (eds), *La cultura e i luoghi del 68’* (Franco Angeli, Milan, 1991); “Women’s history and Gender’s history: The Italian experience” by Giovanna Fiume in *Modern Italy* (November 2005)



in Italy a neo-liberal ideological framework better able to interpret processes of secularization and the collapse of Marxist models. It redefined views of the market in more positive terms in the minds of many Italians. The default worldview became a more pro-market approach to politics and diminished role for the state. References to territorial identities increased (Ruzza and Fella 2009: 49).

Both the left and the right dealt with this transition, but the right interpreted it more successfully. The right has traditionally appealed to the ideology of nationalism and cultural protectionism. Nevertheless, due to the new social climate of the nineties described above, the Italian right adopted a set of discourses that engaged with the emerging ideological notions of entrepreneurship, self-reliance, security, order and family values. Through the redefinition of these popular stances, the right has been able to construct successful populist discourses and provide new political identities. So the right did more than fill an empty political space left by the crash of the old party system and in particular by the demise of the DC. It created in fact the condition for its victory through the construction of an antagonistic political space where the opposition between the ‘people’ and the ‘other’ (such as immigrants) has become the main feature of political discourses. Moreover, right wing populism has been able to play with and give more emphasis to the role of passion in politics. To ground these last statements, it is necessary to delineate the definition of ‘political’ and ‘politics’:

by the ‘political’ I mean the dimension of antagonism which I take to be constitutive of human societies, while by ‘politics’ I mean the set of practices and institutionalization through which an order is created, organizing human coexistence in the context of conflictuality provided by the political. (Mouffe, 2005: 9)

Mouffe’s definition is able to clarify why the construction of political identities is meaningful in politics and why the discursive antagonism around the friend/enemy distinction has been successful for the rise of right wing populism in Italy. Her analysis relies on Carl Schmitt’s work ‘The Concept of the Political’ (1932) to emphasize the ever present possibility of friend/enemy distinctions and the conflictual nature of politics. In acknowledging ‘the political’ in its antagonistic dimension, she clearly envisions democratic politics as a site of power and conflict. Mouffe explains that

antagonism is the essential characteristic of the political, because the nature of political identities is relational<sup>35</sup>. She argues that every identity is relational because the affirmation of a difference is a precondition for the existence of any identity. And in the field of collective identities, this relational characteristic implies the creation of a 'we' that can exist only by the demarcation of a 'they'. This antagonistic relation is contingent and historical, the 'we/they' opposition doesn't express essentialist identities pre-existing the process of identification. The 'they' is the condition for the existence of the 'we'<sup>36</sup>. The we/they relation becomes antagonistic when the one side of the opposition is perceived as putting into question the identity of the other and consequently the two sides perceive themselves as enemies who do not share any common ground.

Mouffe's reading of 'the political' articulated according to a permanent 'we/they' opposition, brings to the fore the impossibility of a fully inclusive consensus without any exclusion. Mouffe's account challenges the hegemony of a liberal understanding of democracy, which depicts populism as a pathological phenomenon within liberal democracies, or as an expression of 'anti-politics' *tout court*.

Mouffe in fact refuses the liberal rationalist account of politics<sup>37</sup> that sees the electors as rational agents competing for the maximization of their own interests, acting in opportunist ways in the political arena. She instead underlines the importance of acknowledging the affective dimension produced by collective identifications. According to her, instincts, 'passions', and desires of bonding form political relationships with other people, and these do not disappear with the advance of individualism and the progress of a supposed rationality. Mouffe explains that

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<sup>35</sup> Post-structuralism, in particular the work by Jacques Derrida highlights the fact that the creation of an identity implies the establishment of a difference, a difference which is often constructed on the basis of a hierarchy that puts in opposition, for example, men and women, black and white, form and matter.

<sup>36</sup> In defining the process of identity formation, psychoanalysis constitutes an important role in Mouffe's approach. In particular, she relies on Lacan's psychoanalysis that describes the formation of collective identities as a consequence of the processes of identification that can never be stable. Identities in fact can never be completely fixed.

<sup>37</sup> To point out what liberal rationalism means, we adopt the two main paradigms that Mouffe defines in relation to liberalism. The first one, the 'aggregative', considers politics as the establishment of an agreement between different competing agents in society. The agents are rational beings, driven by the maximization of their own interests, and they act in an instrumental way in the political sphere. The second paradigm, the 'deliberative', argues in favor of a political debate that sees the application of morality and believes in the creation of a rational moral consensus by the means of free discussion. In this case politics is conceptualized not through economics (like in the aggregative one) but through ethics or morality (Mouffe, 2005: 12-13)

liberal rationalism, that supports the rational consensus model<sup>38</sup>, is not able to interpret the nature of mass political movements such as nationalism or populism.

The part played by passions in politics reveals that, in order to come to terms with the political, it is not enough for liberal theory to acknowledge the existence of a plurality of values and to extol toleration. Democratic politics cannot be limited to establishing compromises among interests or values or to deliberation about the common good; it needs to have a real purchase on people's desires and fantasies (Mouffe, 2005: 6)

The affective dimension of politics is extremely relevant for this research. In fact if populist discourses work on people's desires and fantasies, gender and sexuality<sup>39</sup> might be important issues in the articulation of collective imaginings. For this purpose I will refer to gender representations, or the discourses and the social arrangements which construct libidinal possibilities<sup>40</sup> between the leaders and the 'people'. Consequently, in analyzing Berlusconi and Bossi's populist discourse and the gender representations implied in it, I will try to grasp also how in Italy women and men are differently implicated in the reproduction of popular imaginaries and ideologies, and in policing the boundaries of Italian identity.

Thus, do Berlusconi's sex scandals and Bossi's homophobic expressions reflect a specific political articulation of national identity, based on virile masculinity and sexism as the main libidinal populist identifications?<sup>41</sup>

However, we need first to analyze what kind of unity Lega Nord and Silvio Berlusconi's populist discourses bring about. The next paragraphs will explore this.

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<sup>38</sup> The rational consensus model proclaims the end of the 'partisan' character of politics and the victory of individualism (ignoring the affective dimension mobilized by collective identification) as a progress for democracy. Its aim is the establishment of a world 'beyond left and right', 'beyond hegemony', 'beyond ideologies'.

<sup>39</sup> The term sexuality commonly refers to the biological inner impulse embedded in the individual or the person's sexual orientation. This research instead relies on the feminist definition of sexuality as not a question of the situation, morality or choice of women and men as individuals but as a social construction and consequently a political issue (Andermahr and Lowell and Wolkowitz 2002).

<sup>40</sup> I refer here to Freud's appeal to the libido as the key category explaining the nature of the social bond. The social bond then is a libidinal bond that relates to everything that concerns 'love'. As psychoanalysis has shown, this love is not only sexual love but also the love for people and humanity in general and a devotion to concrete objects and abstract concepts (Laclau 2005)

<sup>41</sup> The next chapter will explore specifically such issues, deeply analyzing Italian populism through concepts like virility and sexism, through looking at different empirical sources: political speeches, posters and interviews.

## 2.4 Lega Nord: 'Padania' and 'the goose that lays the golden eggs'

One of the forces<sup>42</sup> that has been able to use populist discourses as a competitive political tool is Lega Nord. In 1989 this party unified and coordinated the political action of different local autonomist movements that developed in the northern areas of Italy. The Lega gained ground over other Italian political parties, politically exploiting an historical, social and economical fracture in the Italian Republic which is the long-standing cultural divide between the North and the South of Italy. The Lega thus used this historical fracture in order to build up a discursive conflict between the central state and the North of Italy, framing the latter as an area whose economical resources have been exploited for the support of the economy of the South and the corruption of the political elite in Rome. To differentiate themselves from the national parliamentarians, Lega Nord's members spoke in dialects which later became a sort of ritualistic protest against a cultural and administrative 'colonization' of the northern regions by the central state. Behind these acts there was the intention of emphasizing local traditions, voicing demands for political federalism and the recourse to the political instruments of direct democracy.

Lega Nord enlisted a popular fairy tale of "the goose that lays the golden eggs" to symbolize the role of the 'Padania' region. In an election poster, the North is depicted as the goose that lays the golden eggs and in the meantime there is a woman, a stereotyped housewife of centre-southern Italy, taking all the eggs for herself.



1. Lega Nord Poster, 1990



2. 'Oppressed homeland, North Nation, Brother on the free land', Lega Nord, 1989

<sup>42</sup> The already quoted book "Italia Populista" by Tarchi (2003) gives an exhaustive analysis of the different episodes of populism in Italy from fascism to nowadays.

This poster exemplifies one of the most interesting populist features of the Lega: its capacity for constructing its own political identity through an active symbolic production of rituals, myths and slogans. This mechanism of identification through symbols makes it possible for the Lega to put forward a canonized and renovated political identity. For example, Alberto Da Giussano was adopted as the party's symbol. This popular warrior fought during the 'Lombard league' war against Frederick Barbarossa in the 12th century. The Lega's use of the Lombard hero in fact is not only to signify the Lombard historical heroic past and pride but assumes a further signification. In the Lega's appropriation of Da Giussano's myth, he comes to symbolize the reality of today, where the people from the North have to combat the invader (the central state, the southerners, the migrants) in order to gain their own independence (figure. 3).



**3. 'Love your land', Lega Nord poster 1990.  
The figure in the poster is Alberto da Giussano.**

The myth becomes a political instrument because it helps to instill an idea of society that adheres to the Lega's discourse. This is a society that is in conflict: the 'popolo padano' is fighting for its independence from the tyranny of the South. The 'people' of the North mirror their own reality in the 12th century historical context. Thus, the heroic gestures of Alberto Da Giussano are seen as the antecedent enterprise for the construction of 'Padania'.

The recourse to myths and symbols<sup>43</sup> in the construction of ‘Padania’ establishes a representation of the North as a mythical land whose inhabitants share economical interests and cultural traditions which are different and in contraposition to those of the rest of the Italian citizens. Being ‘padano’ becomes the positive sign of distinction, integrity, honesty – what Laclau calls the ‘empty signifier’. This identification transforms and totalizes the various unsatisfied social demands by the northern people. Consequently, proposals for economical liberalization policies, the reduction of welfare state services and the power of the trade unions, the substitution of national taxes with local taxes and the privatization of public enterprises under the control of the central state come to be unified and represented by the slogan: “Sveglia Padano. Con la lega Nord contro Roma Ladrona” (Wake up Padano. With Lega Nord against the Roma thief). Thus, living in the rich and excessively taxed North Italy is charged with very different meanings and becomes the symbol of a larger dissatisfaction with politics. This enables the working class people, the shopkeepers and the small entrepreneurs to identify with a unique collective identity: the honest and productive worker and citizen of the North under the pressure of federal taxes, the victim of the corruption of the central state and under the invasion of an immigration wave.

In the Lega’s discourse, political antagonism has always been portrayed as a situation of warlike divisions. It is interesting to note that the Lega has borrowed some of the symbols and slogans from the left wing to address the antagonisms it wants to portray. For instance, in its election posters (figure 4) the Lega uses concepts which are connected to the memory of the anti-fascist partisan struggle and the anti-colonization movements: ‘Apartheid’ and ‘Lotta di liberazione’ (Liberation struggle). In another poster (figure 5) it repurposes the image of the Chinese Tiananmen student protest of 1989 with the slogan ‘Grazie Lega’. The Lega wants to show that its political work has the same antagonistic spirit of the Chinese students and intellectuals fighting against the communist regime. This adoption of specific historical left wing

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<sup>43</sup> According to sociologist Merijn Oudenampsen, the role of myth is extremely significant in politics. He takes on Claude Lefort’s proposition which the latter developed after reading *Il Principe* by Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527). Lefort says that every society creates an imaginary image of itself, and that – in a democratic society – this self-image is the subject of continuous conflict. Oudenampsen consequently states: “*A society stages itself, imagines itself and understands itself by way of the conflict in the political domain. In a certain sense, therefore, we should understand politics as a theatre play, a form of telling stories about the identity of a society. In a monarchy, by definition, there was only one performer; nowadays, a number of politicians fight over who can tell the best story on the political stage.*” (Oudenampsen 2010: 8)

slogans demonstrates the Lega's capacity of re-inventing political discourses for the purpose of its political opportunism. It emphasizes an antagonist stance in politics through communication that applies emotionality and affectively. This language has close resonance with the language of 'Qualunquismo', as discussed in the previous chapter. It takes on a populist strategy of transgressing conventional political borders of the right and the left at the same time as adopting some of the elements of their imagery, modifying and adapting them to the Lega's political programme. The Lega's most popular poster is one which also adopts a left wing image by representing an American Indian (figure 6). The poster promotes an anti-immigration stance by making an analogy between the experiences of the 'Popolo Padano' and the American Indians: "They could not put any rules on the immigration flux. Now they live in the reserves. Think about it". This process of exploiting the symbolic and affective drive of the experience of American Indians and their segregation in United States is used to explain the risk of immigration for the people of Northern Italy.



4. Lega nord Poster, 1993  
Central State equal to apartheid.  
Liberation struggle'



5. 'Thanks Lega'  
Lega Nord Poster, 1990



6 'They could not put any rules on 'the immigration flux. Now they live in the reserves Think about it.' 2005

The posters which I have analyzed here are an important example of rhetoric as an essential tool of the Lega's identitarian specificity. Its leaders have been developing a way of expressing political claims that is a marked departure from the political elite's jargon, the '*politichese*'. Their use of the ordinary people's language enables an

identification process that goes beyond the strictures of social class, education level, culture, habits and tradition and gives the illusion that the Lega's voters are part of the same ethnic aggregation: 'the people of the North', 'Padania's people'. Using a sort of bombastic approach to political discourse, through vulgar, rough and 'coarse expressions' (Pezzini 2001), the Lega broke the symbolic codes which the electorate got used to hearing from the traditional political parties. The Lega's appeal seems more credible because it speaks the same language as its electorate. The Lega's communication therefore mirrors the popular language spoken in the café or in the street with friends – this is a communication that unifies, homogenizes and identifies the interlocutors. The overstatement, the aggression and the boorishness of the Lega's leaders are not casual but elaborated as a clear reaction to the intellectualization of politics. These in fact constitute some of the core features of Lega's language. This aspect is part of the construction of the anti-elite stance that, as we already saw before, is one of the key defining elements of populism today in Europe. The fact that the Lega's leader Umberto Bossi adopts a simple, popular, and common language in any public event also expresses the Lega's aim of creating a direct relationship between the party's leader and the people. This personification is instrumental in gaining the Lega's supporters' acceptance of a rigid and personalized party administration. The Lega in fact doesn't have an effective collegial direction, it rather limits the recruitment of new members so as to impede the formation of dissident groups inside the party, nor does it promote a continuous militant participation of the members. The Lega thus stimulates a psychological identification through key words and slogans, giving priority to direct communication between the leader and its followers. Bossi, as the majority of the European neo-populist leaders, has accentuated his charisma through rituals and symbolic communication which simultaneously reproduce a relationship of loyalty between him and the members. This commitment is ritualized every year through the gathering in Pontida, in the province of Bergamo, where there is a collective oath that proves the supporters' faith in Bossi and his political programme (figure 7).





**7. The 'Popolo Padano' at the Pontida meeting, 2004**

In the last twenty years Lega Nord's political discourses have mobilized, aggregated and politicized the people. Its antagonist rhetoric focuses on the productivity of the northern worker versus the central state's negligence. Further, the concept of the self-made man who only through his skills has managed to built up his fortune is meant to reinforce the Popolo Padano's moral superiority. The 'Padania' thus becomes the land of uncorrupted people. It is potentially able to constitute a nation itself, and its virtues must be defended from various external enemies. The Lega fixes its own identity through configuring an effective enemy. In effect, this means that the Lega doesn't have any intrinsic ethnic and linguistic specificity. Rather, its identity is performed in the course of an antagonistic relation towards someone else. This is the reason of the Lega's effort of creating a communitarian imaginary through the appeal to the *demos*, the northern people defrauded by the elite, and to the *ethnos*, the collectivity of the white local people which can be destroyed by multicultural society. Moreover, if the political antagonism- the 'political frontier' as Laclau says - is not continuously portrayed, the Lega's political identity collapses<sup>44</sup>. It is worth noting that in the Lega's history the enemies have been quite different and changed on the basis of political opportunism and Lega's participation in government. At the beginning of its political career, the Lega constructs its political space by

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<sup>44</sup> Laclau describes that the discursive formation of the 'people' involves constructing the frontier to make the people represent themselves with a determined identity. This frontier however is unstable, and in process of constant displacement due to the fact that there are always new unsatisfied demands in the political system. Consequently, populist leaders might incorporate (or exclude) these new demands (that is, new political actors) and reconfigure their 'people' and the 'enemy'.

fighting against the ‘*terroni*’<sup>45</sup> and the central state. Later its struggle was against the ‘*poteri forti*’: the big business (the big industry and multinationals) and the European Union and its bureaucrats<sup>46</sup>. Nowadays the Lega’s leitmotiv is instead the opposition to immigration and in this regard its stances are openly xenophobic and racist (figure 8). It is not only the case that the Lega is stressing the issue of immigration and security. The question of decreasing the flux of migration towards Europe has become a hot topic in the European political agenda, and not only by the right wing parties. In particular since May 1999, when the ‘Schengen agreement’ was incorporated within the legal and institutional framework of the EU in the Treaty of Amsterdam, immigration became a mainstream issue in almost every European country. In the political debates surrounding immigration policies, right wing populist movements distinguished themselves from other political actors by adopting extreme racist and xenophobic statements which discursively blew out of proportion the tensions and fears linked to the streams of new migrants.



**8. 'Illegal immigrants: torture them, it is legitimate selfdefence', Lega Nord poster, 2009.**

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<sup>45</sup>'*Terroni*' is a pejorative term used in the North of Italy to label the people born in the south. Immediately after the Second World War the migration of southern workers to the North of the country has been massive due to the poorest economical conditions of the South of the country. Many migrants got jobs in the industries or in the public sector as teachers, administrative workers and bureaucrats. At the end of the eighties the Lega started to claim that in the '*Padania*' the public working positions were occupied by the '*terroni*' who should be sent back to the South so the '*padani*' could have more job positions available.

<sup>46</sup> The Lega and other European right wing populist formations claim that the European Commission is illegitimate in taking political decisions over singular national populations because they do this without having a direct electoral mandate. In this discourse the E.U. is depicted as the actor responsible for threatening 'the people's sovereignty and legislating policies which are against 'the people's' interests.

This latter choice is also connected to the transformation of the Lega from an oppositional movement to a party in government. It cannot coherently have the struggle against the central state as its first political claim when it is part of it. However, this institutionalization has not lead to its leaders abandoning their previous populist discourses. Bossi in particular has always been able to conserve his populist rhetoric, promoting an image of the Lega as the party which struggles also within the coalition government to promote the interests of 'Padania'. Bossi is aware that the Lega can change its political alliances and modify the social targets of its propaganda, but it cannot abandon the populist discourse from which it derives its identity and existence in the political arena.

### **2.5 Silvio Berlusconi: 'Forza Italia', a new political product for consumer citizens**

Silvio Berlusconi is one of the main actors responsible for making the term 'Italian populism' known internationally. His decision to enter into politics and create Forza Italia in December of the 1993 lead to his transformation from a mass media tycoon to the Prime Minister of Italy in 1994, 2001 and 2008. The political activity of this Milanese entrepreneur is closely allied with the typical features of a populist leader, even if Forza Italia (now called 'Popolo Della Liberta') was not born as a spontaneous mass movement like Lega Nord. It has since the beginning assumed populist discourses as the main ingredient of its communication.

At the beginning of the nineties, the passage from the 'First Republic' to the 'Second Republic' has been characterized by a significant political crisis due to the collapse of the old party system. This political climate made possible the articulation of political discourses which demanded the simplification of public administration, and idealized the managerial model of economic organization. The new parties supported themselves through the charisma of a leader who offered new feelings of belonging which were different from those offered by traditional political identities. At the same time, newspapers and television started to celebrate the citizenship of those not involved in politics. The media interest in public figures or local administrators who have never participated actively in the old parties supported the rise of the discursive construction of the myth of civil society. This myth has been articulated through arguments which represent civil society as a public body which is better off

governing itself rather than being governed by the political elite in the government. This is due to the ‘natural virtues’ of the lack of corruption, honesty, self-discipline and mutual reciprocity which are discursively vested into it. The media construct these mythical values especially in relation to local administrators who have a background as entrepreneurs, economic experts, intellectuals, and who were depicted as honest citizens not connected with the party hierarchy. This climate produced some popular expectations: in particular, it was seen as possible that someone without extensive experience as a politician could bring political change in Italy. It is not a coincidence that Silvio Berlusconi entered politics at this precise period of political crisis in Italy. His appearance in the political arena was presented as an action which fulfills the popular will for radical change in the Italian political system. Berlusconi introduced himself as a self-made man of a middle class background to the Italian electorate: “*Sono uno di voi*” (I am one of you). In emphasizing his successful career as real estate and media tycoon, the Prime Minister was able to express his charisma and give the impression of having all the good skills which qualify him to manage the Italian State in the same way as he manages his several enterprises.

Berlusconi’s representation of himself as a natural-born leader and his proclaimed will of supporting and representing the needs of the people are the main populist characteristics of his political figure. The Prime Minister exemplifies the typical feature of populist leaders of creating a context of socio-political dramatization that justifies their self-representation as the savior of a political crisis (Taguieff 2002).

In thus exploiting the social tensions derived from the Italians’ discontent of the malfunctioning state bureaucracy and the corruption of national political institutions, Berlusconi charged his career as a businessman with symbolic meanings. He depicted himself as the only man who could really bring about the political renovation of the Italian state. His political discourse aims at creating discursively the popular will to liberate Italy from those who are depicted as responsible for Italy’s political and economical decline. These include the political establishment, the communist parties, the left wing judges and the trade unions. ‘Freedom’ is the concept/symbol that Berlusconi deploys in order to articulate his populist discourse. It is an ambiguous term, and due to its conceptual vagueness it is able to represent different meanings and ideologies and bind an heterogeneous electorate who would otherwise have heterogeneous demands. The term freedom is the ‘empty signifier’ that is able to

recruit several Italian electors who can identify with the imaginary community of the *Popolo della liberta'*.

Working class people, housewives, entrepreneurs and middle-class people start to identify with Berlusconi's political dream of transforming Italy into a modern, richer and more functional Italian state. They have been interpellated<sup>47</sup> in a way which enables them to believe that the state can be run as a football club or as a company. The populist technique here revolves around the 'charging' of Berlusconi's personality with such symbolic connotations, and around the bringing together of different storylines around his image and his slogans: 'Azienda Italia' (Italia Company), 'Scendere in campo' (taking the field), 'Gioca la partita' (play the match)<sup>48</sup>.

The image of a positive, reliable, and open-minded man characterizes all the Prime Minister's political posters. In particular the smiling face and the confident body posture have become icons of his seductive power. In the political poster '*Un Presidente operaio per cambiare l'Italia*' (figure 8) these features are most evident. Together with Berlusconi's image, the sentence expresses a rhetoric typical of a 'compassionate conservatism' (Tarchi 2003). Indeed Berlusconi intertwined his constructed heroic personality with the Christian moral duty of supporting the lower social classes, the working class and poor people.

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<sup>47</sup> Althusser's concept of 'interpellation' refers to a process of ideological manipulation. Althusser's famous example of interpellation is a police officer who yells on the street, 'Hey, you there!' The individuals who feels personally addressed acknowledges the police officer's authority. Althusser describes that the same process occurs during people's ideological formation: they feel that they have been personally appealed to and addressed by an ideological exposition that they make their own. Interpellation is an ideological recruiting process, as a result of symbols, images, narrations used to fit people's everyday world into certain political interpretive storylines which explain actually existing situations. (Oudenampsen 2010)

<sup>48</sup> Since the beginning of Forza Italia, Berlusconi recruited his collaborators from one of his company 'Publitalia', a company that is in charge of selling television spaces for advertisements. Thanks to 'Publitalia's adroitness in the advertisement field, Berlusconi could adopt the seductive language described above. It is worth mentioning that Berlusconi's vocabulary always refers to his successful career as a media tycoon and as the owner of the internationally celebrated 'Milan' football club.



9. **Forza Italia poster, ‘A working class president to change Italy’, 2001**

It is worth mentioning that the role of the media is extremely important for the construction of Berlusconi’s political figure. As the owner of the most popular of Italy’s three private broadcasters, he has always used television as the principal space for the diffusion of his political ideals. In stimulating a hearty contact with his television audience, Berlusconi acted ‘complicitously’ with the people to whom his discourse was directed. His rhetoric resembles the language of ‘Qualunquismo’, although in a different way from that of Lega Nord. His romantic celebration of the common people’s virtues is not directed at an idealized or abstract community – like in the case of Lega Nord – but at a people who are composed of consumers and television watchers. Berlusconi is aware that Italian identity and life style is extremely conditioned by the models disseminated through the mass media. The official video of PDL during the last electoral national campaign in 2008 is an excellent demonstration of this dynamic. It is a video in which several people, who represent the Italian population, are singing in homage to Silvio Berlusconi. In “Meno male che Silvio c’è” video (Thank goodness that Silvio is there), the kitschy images of women and men singing together resemble a mash up of popular television culture. Berlusconi is depicted as the popular hero to whom teachers, call centers workers, bakers and construction’s workers need to appeal in order to fulfill their ‘Italian dream’<sup>49</sup>.

<sup>49</sup> The video can be watched here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WXf-YbsSh0Y>. It is interesting to point out that the ‘people’ depicted in the video are smiling, positive and happy workers, students and shopkeepers. This is meant to symbolize that thanks to Berlusconi, Italy is a land of economic and social opportunities. However, this is not the case for everyone. The people depicted in the video are all white. Migrants are not considered part of Berlusconi and his voters’ Italian dream.



Snapshots of PDL 's official video for the national electoral campaign in 2008.

## Conclusions

Italy can be considered a 'laboratory of populism' in Europe because of how its populist leaders have managed to position themselves as the major political force in the last 16 years. Although the Italian right wing coalition has supported political claims and policies typical of extreme right wing movements, it has been able to position itself as centre-right. This has been possible because they have been able to translate radical xenophobic, racist and conservative claims into a legitimate political expression of the international and local social and economical tensions of the late 80s and early 90s (such as the impact of economical globalization, international migration, and labor market flexibilization which have reduced the power of the trade unions and social solidarity). Moreover, Silvio Berlusconi and Umberto Bossi occupied the

political space left by the collapse of the 'First Republic' party system: they revived and refashioned the political antagonism that has always characterized Italy from the 1945 on, based on the ideological opposition of 'Democrazia Christiana' and 'Partito Comunista'. Consequently, they have been able to bind together and give form to a political discourse which can recruit electors with different political demands. Those who were searching a new political identity and those who felt anger and discomfort due to the institutional political crisis. Hence, *Lega Nord* and *Popolo della liberta'* have been able to introduce new political scenarios, symbolism and narratives that have become hegemonic. In fact, exploiting the Prime Minister Berlusconi's media empire, they have been able to storm the political stage and enlist popular imaginations in order to fight their political adversaries. Their political force has been built up through the exploitation of the roles, patterns and identities already existing in Italian history and political culture. Through using the political charisma of a leader and the cult of personalities, they have managed to generate new heroes and new enemies.

By putting on the mantle of progress and radical change, the Italian right wing has reinforced conservatism in Italian society. By appealing to the 'ordinary people' or the 'autochthon' as against the migrants, right wing populism is accentuating the normalization of traditional identities such as gender, race and class. The next chapters will investigate specifically in which way certain representations of Silvio Berlusconi and Umberto Bossi might reinforce sexism in Italian society. I will also reserve some space to debate about the questions: What is the role of women and, more broadly, the female electorate in the rise of Italian populism? How do women and feminist movements react to the conservatism, machismo and racism of right wing populism?



### ***3. Populist masculinities: right wing rhetoric and women as national fetish***

In the former chapter I analyzed the crisis of the Italian party system during ‘Tangentopoli’ and the rise of right wing populist leaders as a consequence. In this regard, my research has framed the Italian ‘populist moment’ as a discursive construction which has bound together the different dissatisfactions and political demands which emerged during that crisis. Hence, the ‘Popolo Padano’ and the ‘Popolo della Liberta’ became the symbols of the new political will of the Italian electorate. I have already analyzed the myths and storylines which have given form to Bossi and Berlusconi’s ‘people’. In this chapter I will look at what gender models they have employed to interpellate Italian voters. My hypothesis is that in right wing populist discourses representations of masculinity and femininity have played a significant role in the identification process between the voters and the political leaders. In particular, virility<sup>50</sup>, such as the expression of heroic virtues, authority and sexual potency, may have been some of the main expressions through which male and female voters have recognized and identified with Bossi and Berlusconi.

This hypothesis is based on the observation that in political history, political rhetoric has often included a rhetoric of virility. Indeed from the time of Machiavelli through to Italian fascism and representative democracies, political rhetoric has always implicitly emphasised the King’s or the Nation’s virile virtues (Mosse 1985, Anthias and Yuval Davis 1989, Yuval Davis 1997). Recently, the “War On Terrorism” and military campaigns like ‘Enduring Freedom’ in Iraq, images of virility revived<sup>51</sup>. For instance, Bush’s announcement of military victory in Iraq in May 1

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<sup>50</sup> In this research the definition of virility relies on Spackman’s work. She explains that virility cannot be only grasped as equivalent of ‘phallic’ or ‘masculine’, that it is contrary to ‘effeminate’. She says that in English, virility assumes different meanings. For the Oxford English Dictionary ‘virile’ may refer to strength, energy and a strong sex drive or “vigorous, strong, and manly”. This term then might be also used to identify women’s behaviors. For example, in the same work by Spackman and in Victoria De Grazia’s text (1993) women in fact have adopted the rhetoric of virility to underline their own agency and protagonism in fascism. However, the models of virility and masculinity are historical and culture-bound ones. In Italy the ‘common sense’ definition of virility has changed since fascism. Especially with the advent of mass media communication and consumerism, models of virility and masculinity multiplied and incorporated advertisements and market-oriented models (Boni 2008, Connell 2005, Nixon 1997).

<sup>51</sup> There is an interesting article by Jasbir K. Puar and Amit S. Rai “Monster, Terrorist, Fag: The War On Terror” (2002) that highlights how gender and sexuality are central in the construction of the “war on terror” discourse and Bush’s political propaganda. The authors argue that in United States after September 9/11 “*the forms of power being deployed in the war on terrorism in fact draw on processes of quarantining a*

2003 has been a paradigmatic example of mediatic spectacle of virile masculinity in politics. The image of the President George W. Bush flying to the battleship 'Abraham Lincoln' with an advanced high tech military aircraft and speaking in front of hundreds of male soldiers as the 'hero' of the American Nation illustrates what some authors have called the 'Remasculinization of America'<sup>52</sup>.

However, assuming that all the political rhetoric imply virile practices might be problematic. Such assumption may lead to accept gender politics as natural without analyzing how it has been historically constituted<sup>53</sup>. Without a rhetorical and ideological analysis of the culture that produces populism and the culture that populism produced one risks an unconditional acceptance of Italian gender politics. For this reason my research is going to analyze the layers in which Italian populist rhetoric has found its roots and its sedimentation, such as Catholicism, Fascism, advertisements and political institutions and television as well as how right wing populism departs from or transforms technologies of sexuality, white supremacy and nationalism in order to reinforce the populist antagonism of 'us' versus the 'enemy'/the 'other'. In this regard, I want to investigate how Bossi and Berlusconi interpellate women as symbols of political identity, using female representation and women's bodies as sexual and racial signifiers in right wing populism. For this purpose I will analyze Lega Nord's creation of the beauty contest "Miss Padania" and the hyper-sexualization of women's images in political propaganda. These examples correlate with what several feminist thinkers have explained in depth: women's beauty and bodies have been used to represent the ethnos, culture and traditions in

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*racialized and sexualized other (...)*". The Arab terrorists are depicted as 'the other', the monsters, the fags by public opinion. This is because - Puar and Ari's argument - attacking the Twin Towers, the terrorists have castrated the symbols of American capitalist masculinity. The 'anti-terrorism' discourse becomes then the right wing's attempt to, not only condemn the terrorists, but to instill discipline on the entire American population. Through politics of patriotism and nationalism, Bush's administration, with the complicity of mass media, provide American society pedagogies of normalization, based on white supremacy and heteronormative values.

<sup>52</sup> Berit Von Der Lippe (2006) borrows this concept by Susan Jeffords (1989). She describes that American culture has been able to crystallize certain forms of masculinity due to the U.S' involvement in warfare and its representation on TV, in films and other fictions. Von Der Lippe explains then that in the President's arrival by aircraft (not helicopter), the combination of Bush and high tech technology resembles the masculinity of Rambo or Terminator. In the television image Bush's strength, authority and masculinity become symbols of the American nation which he represents and nobody puts under question.

<sup>53</sup> I refer here to the concept of hegemony. A hegemonic discourse is something that people generally assume without critically examining it. The values, models and interests incorporated into this discourse are presented as universal. In Italian politics, the forms of masculinity in politics have rarely been put in discussion, with the notable exception of feminist thinkers, who are largely excluded from the Italian public debate.

nationalist and populist narratives. My hypothesis is that in times of neo-conservatism and its populist appeals to religion, ethnocentrism and religion, this phenomenon is more apparent. For this reason, I focus on discovering if Italian women have been appealed to become not only allegoric symbols of the nation or patriotism but also – using Yuval- Davis’ terms - racist signifiers of national and cultural identity<sup>54</sup>.

In the following, I will investigate in which ways Italian populism interpellates the Italian electorate through gender representations. This might reveal how certain hegemonic masculinities and femininities are regarded as universal and natural in political discourses, and how they manifest through the leader’s behavior and popular culture.

### **3.1 ‘Celodurismo’ and ‘Gnocche’: virility and sexism in political discourses.**

At the beginning of the nineties Lega Nord and Forza Italia started to use a rhetoric with a strong sexual connotation. The slogan “Noi della Lega, ce lo abbiamo duro” (We, members of Lega Nord, have a stiff cock) became famous, and the term ‘gnocca’ (a great piece of pussy)<sup>55</sup> started to be used to refer to women, politicians or voters indiscriminately<sup>56</sup>.

In her text “Veline, nyokke e cilici”, Giovanna Campani (2009) listed different episodes when right wing populist leaders’ language was remarkably sexist. For example, in 1993 during an electoral meeting in a small village close to Bergamo, Umberto Bossi said: “Ehi Boniver, bonazza, la Lega e’ sempre armata, ma con il manico”<sup>57</sup> [Hey Boniver, pretty woman, Lega is always armed, but with the handle]. Campani reflects on the obvious sexism toward women. In fact, calling the socialist politician Boniver with the expression of “bonazza” (screwable woman), Bossi relates

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<sup>54</sup> In this regard, I refer to ‘Lega Nord’ and ‘Partito della Liberta’s manipulation of the discourse of western women’s emancipation to reinforce the discourse on ‘clash of civilization’ between Christianity versus Islam and ‘European-ness’ versus ‘Other-ness’.

<sup>55</sup> It is a fetishist way to identify a physically attractive woman. It in fact refers to female genitalia to describe the entire woman.

<sup>56</sup> There is a video that demonstrates how it is popular for Lega’s politicians to use the term ‘gnocca’ in Lega’s meetings. The politician Alessandro Savoi invites the audience to be supporters of the Lega Nord with the slogan: “C’e’ gnocca per tutti” (there is a great pussy for everyone). [http://video.unita.it/media/Politica/Il\\_consigliere\\_leghista\\_Venite\\_in\\_Lega\\_c\\_gnocca\\_per\\_tutti\\_1280.html](http://video.unita.it/media/Politica/Il_consigliere_leghista_Venite_in_Lega_c_gnocca_per_tutti_1280.html).

<sup>57</sup> Ansa’ press 26<sup>th</sup> September 1993, quoted in Campani, G. (2009) “*Veline, nyokke e cilici*”, p. 114.

to women merely as male objects of desire. However there is another element that Campani doesn't consider. The term 'handle' is an euphemism for a phallus. Bossi intentionally uses this word to envision a phallic symbol of authority, aggressiveness and strength. This language reflects an idea of politics as space only for men and virile cohorts.

Persisting on the same sexist vocabulary, during a political meeting in Vincenza (2006) Bossi says to Berlusconi: "Silvio, te lo avevo detto che ce' l'abbiamo duro, ed e' per questo che qui oggi e' pieno di donne"<sup>58</sup> [Silvio, I had told you that we have a stiff cock, for this reason today there are many women here]. In this speech, women are simply represented as objects which desire the virility of their (male) leaders. Virility prevails on the political stage and the stiff cock becomes the master symbol that, for Bossi, should activate a libidinal connection between the male leader and the female cohorts.

Lega Nord's speeches drive me then to analyze how sexism is still a valuable asset in the recruitment of Italian voters. As many authors have already emphasized, the sexist gender clichés deployed by Bossi and Berlusconi are not innocent and simple expressions of right wing conservatism. Rather they are part of a broader political strategy to win the allegiance of the Italian electorate. This is because populist leaders know that the representation of gender relations based on the idea of women's subordination to male political authority is deeply rooted in Italian popular culture (Ross 2010, Camoletto and Bertone 2010, Ricatti 2010). What are the origins of this conservative vision of gender roles in politics? And why is it still so persistent notwithstanding the fundamental challenges to Italian patriarchy which came with the feminist movement of the 70s?

Tracing the history of Italian politics, it is worth to briefly analyze Fascism and its role in promoting virility as one of the main features of Italian political culture. Drawing on the work of historians who have reconstructed the model of masculinity in Italy emerging from scientific and political debates, Raffaella Ferrero and Chiara Bertone (2010) explain that Fascism exerted a relevant influence on the construction of male desire, sexuality and men's behaviors towards women. This was an influence that extended from the decades after the Second World War up until now. Their arguments are based on acknowledging that fascist ideology has incorporated the

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<sup>58</sup> Ansa press, 21<sup>st</sup> October 2006, quoted in Campani G, pag. 114

conservative precepts of Roman Catholic Church concerning the role of women in patriarchal society.

This Fascist/Catholic alliance translated into the promotion of a traditional rural family model, founded on a rigid hierarchy of the sexes and generations, and marked by a highly repressive sexual ethic, centring on procreation. On the other hand, Fascism's forebears in the radical movements of the early twentieth century had bequeathed it another, anthropological goal: an anti-bourgeois, anti-feminist revolution that was part of an effort to promote the virility of the Italians and construct 'a new man' for whom activism and aggressiveness were more highly prized than self control (Ferrero and Camoletto 2010: 238)

The work by Barbara Spackman (1996) brings to the fore the relation between masculinity and fascism too, but it even gives a major emphasis on the role of virility in fascist rhetoric. Drawing on Laclau's analysis on the discursive formation of hegemonic storylines, she argues that fascist discourse is filled with masculinisation and a rhetoric of 'virility'. She argues that virility is not simply one of Fascism's many features, but rather that the cults of authority, heroic virtues, physical force, sacrifice and sexual potency as displayed by Mussolini are all effects of virility. She adds that virility is the 'master term' that binds together the different political demands reunited under fascism.

The analyses by Spackman, Ferrero and Camoletto argue that right wing populism today appeals to sexist models and masculine symbols of power which Catholicism and Fascism have significantly contributed to settle into Italian political culture. In this historical frame, Bossi's 'celodurismo' becomes clearer. He knows that virility still plays an important part in the interpellative force of political discourse. The constant appeal to the 'stiff cock' reminds Lega's members and the Italian electorate in general of Bossi's embodiment of the cult of strength, male bonding and aggressiveness. It also implicitly remarks that women are excluded by body politics. In Lacanian psychoanalytic terms, women are castrated, cut off by the Father laws that control the political realm.

However, one might question that this analysis on the models of virility and masculinity in politics doesn't consider the political and social experiences which emerged after fascism and during the consolidation of democracy in Italy. These are experiences which may have changed Italian customs in terms of gender relations.

This observation is partly valid, and it needs consideration. Actually in 1946 women obtained the right to vote in the national elections. Yet, this political conquest didn't automatically improve the conditions of women in terms of female and male roles in the family and society. In fact, during the 50s and 60s Italy continued with the institutional and cultural conformity with the Fascist model of sexual ethic and family founded on a rigid hierarchy of the sexes. Only in the 70s there was an important break with the fascist model. Feminist movements fought to legalize divorce and abortion. They also put enough pressure to obtain women equal rights in family legislation. These legal changes and the economical transformations that swept the country during the 70s presented a challenge to the representation of sexual relations in Italy. With feminism, women entered into public discourse with different themes: female sexuality, the right to pleasure, equal rights and opportunities in society and politics. This challenged significantly the role of men in the family and in society, but it didn't automatically produce a public discourse which changed men's viewing of male sexuality and masculinity. Men's heterosexuality and the hegemonic model of masculinity remained unquestioned or depicted as unchangeable and normative (Ross 2010, Ferrero and Camoletto 2010). This affected the political dimension, where political authority continues to be considered the prerequisite of virile, heterosexual men. In this frame we need to analyze Berlusconi's political discourse. In January 2009 he was talking about the rapes that happened in Guidonia (Rome) one year before<sup>59</sup>. He comments: "Anche in un paese piu' militaresco e poliziesco possibile una cosa del genere puo' sempre capitare. Non e' che si puo' pensare di mettere in campo una forza tale, dovremmo avere tanti soldati quante sono le belle ragazze, credo che non ce la faremo mai" [It is always possible that these things (the rapes) happen, even in the most militarized and heavily policed country. It is not possible to think about militarizing the country that much. We should have many soldiers per each beautiful woman living in the country. We will never accomplish that.]

In stead of denouncing the rise of violence and rapes against women in Italy as social phenomena which are the effects of sexism, machismo, and unequal gender relations, Berlusconi reinforces another sexist stance: raping is a sort of 'natural' phenomenon that society and government cannot realistically try to solve. By the term 'natural, the

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<sup>59</sup> In Guidonia, a place situated in the North-East side of Rome, the 21<sup>st</sup> January 2008, four men attacked a couple who was inside a car parked in a street. The four men beat the guy of the couple and then raped the girl for four times.

prime minister implicitly says that, sometimes, male desire can naturally drive men to commit sexual harassment, especially in front of pretty women. In this speech, women are depicted as mere male objects of desire, and forms and meanings of male sexuality and masculinity are not put into question. His political discourse revived normative gender and sexual identities: heterosexual sex, virile masculinity and 'fragile' women (only policemen and male soldiers can protect them). These categories didn't receive so much critical scrutiny by public debate. Some female and feminist journalists, organizations, (a few) political opponents and a large part of foreign media have actually criticized Berlusconi's sexism. But such critiques have been often presented by taking a moral stand and focusing primarily on Berlusconi's private life, characterized by sex scandals with minors and escorts<sup>60</sup>. As Francesco Ricatti says, these moral critiques reinforce the image of Berlusconi's 'hypertrophic heterosexuality'<sup>61</sup>. They interpret the Prime Minister's sexuality in term of 'not-politically correct' behavior, without analyzing his sexist discourses and sexual activity as cultural practices that are rooted in Italian culture and therefore largely unquestioned.

This [moral critique] in turn further sustains the power of Berlusconi and his allies: it is not by chance that the media close to Berlusconi have also emphasized his hypertrophic heterosexuality. For example the newspaper *Libero* defended Berlusconi saying "Mussolini had his women as well, we need a prime minister, not a Trappist monk". Here a heterosexual hyperactivity is directly and positively related to authoritarian power (...) (Ricatti 2010: 4)

Ricatti thus emphasizes the unquestioned connection between political authority and masculine sexual potency in Italian culture. He, like the other above mentioned authors, argues that Catholicism plays an important role in the cultural and political context that characterizes Italian populism today. Due to the fact that Catholicism is

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<sup>60</sup> In the spring 2009, an Italian escort Patrizia D'Addario declared to have spent two nights in Palazzo Grazioli, the Prime Minister's residency in Rome. She had a sexual relationship with Berlusconi who had the habit of organizing parties with female models, escorts and show-girls which sometimes ended with an orgy. In the book 'Gradisca Presidente' D'Addario unveils an exchange between power and sex between the Prime Minister and the women invited to Berlusconi's private residency in Rome and Sardinia. Some of these women were promised to participate in a television show in Italy's private or public broadcastings or to be launched as new right wing politicians in the European Parliament election. Berlusconi has also been involved in other scandals, such as his presumed love affair with a eighteen-year-old Noemi Letizia, a girl who became famous for calling the Prime Minister 'Papi'. This is a nickname which was also used by other show-girls, escorts and models.

<sup>61</sup> In medical terms hypertrophic means an increased volume of an organ. I think that Ricatti uses the term 'hypertrophic heterosexuality' to emphasize metaphorically the Prime Minister's sex activity and obsession of young and beautiful women.

ideologically and institutionally dominated by misogyny and homophobia, he says that sexual practices and sexual and gender identities that cannot be included in a heteronormative society are often hidden. He exemplifies it by examining the sex scandals in which the former leftist President of Lazio Region has been involved in 2009. When newspapers have revealed that Marazzo had sex with different transsexual prostitutes and had been blackmailed for it, he resigned from his position, went to a Catholic convent to expiate his sins and asked for forgiveness from the Pope. In this case, Marazzo's male sexuality becomes a political scandal because it doesn't take part in the hegemonic heterosexual masculinity, which is something that Italian Catholic society cannot accept.

There is another episode that shows this linkage between politics, Catholicism and misogyny in Italy. I refer here to the Eluana Englaro's case. Englaro was in irreversible coma for 17 years and her father together with the doctors wanted to turn off the machines that were keeping her alive (in accordance with Eluana's own will which she declared to her father before the accident). Berlusconi, his allies and a part of his political adversaries attempted to stop this decision. They presented to the parliament a decree in the name of Catholic faith and principles on human life and procreation, which ultimately was not passed. Berlusconi justified this decision by arguing that Eluana had an active reproductive body that could still give birth to a baby and she was good looking too. These exclamations have shocked a part of the Italian public opinion. The Prime Minister publicly fantasizes about Eluana's body which resembles a rape fantasy,

These two episodes thus mirror that heteronormativity<sup>62</sup>, virile masculinity and misogyny are presented as 'common sense' discourses in Italian public opinion. Catholic institutions and political institutions have always intertwined in the ideological construction of gender relations. This is the reason why several men and women have a cultural inclination to identify with a political authority characterized by such discourses. And right wing populism's rhetoric of virility, expressed by 'celodurismo' and 'gnocche' reflects this. It revives sexism and homophobia in order to appeal to Italian voters and binds them together through such discourses. In this

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<sup>62</sup> Heteronormativity is a term used in the discussion of gender and society, mostly, but not exclusively within the field of critical theory. It criticizes the social institutions whose policies reinforce the belief that human beings fall into two distinct and complementary categories, male and female. This belief also promotes that sexual and marital relations are normal only when they occur between two people of different genders and that each gender has certain natural roles in life. Heterosexuality is considered to be the only normal sexual orientation.



frame, it becomes clearer why the hegemonic discourse in Italian culture is that political authority is a male authority and politics is basically a men's space. This clarifies why in Italy today women rarely obtain influential political positions in the government or in Parliament and why the percentage of women's participation in politics remains one of the lowest in Europe and in the world<sup>63</sup>.

It is important to mention that counter-hegemonic narrations of sexuality and gender relations<sup>64</sup> exist in Italy. Feminist movements have produced significant gender analyses of Italian politics that unfortunately didn't bring about a radical transformation of male political authority and its political institutions. Especially in the last years, young feminists and (a few) male groups have been focusing primarily on discussions about Italian hegemonic masculinity in a critical way. Yet, they have still difficulties of entering into larger and broader public debate. This is because the major Italian parties and left wing political movements don't consider gender an analytical category in the elaboration of Italian politics.

It might be difficult to understand why women identify with such misogynic symbols, images and languages that populism proposes for them as well as why the percentage of female voters is higher for Berlusconi's right wing coalition than it is for other parties<sup>65</sup>. In analyzing this aspect, it is worth exploring what are the narrations that Italian politics from Fascism to today have produced in terms of women's role in society<sup>66</sup>. This is important because my assumption is that the symbols and the storylines that the political parties and institutions have been producing for fifty years

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<sup>63</sup> The serious social conditions of Italian women emerge from the World Economic Forum's October 2010 Global Gender Gap Report. The WEF looks at such issues as wage parity, labor-force participation, and career-advancement opportunities for women. In every category but education, Italy shows a bad position: in labor participation, 87th place worldwide; wage parity, 121st; opportunity for women to take leadership positions, 97th. In the report's overall ranking, Italy now places 74th in the world for its treatment of women—behind Colombia, Peru, and Vietnam.

<sup>64</sup> On the issue of masculinity, it is worth to mention the work of "Maschile Plurale". It is a group of men criticizing the model of virile masculinity in Italian culture. They support women on campaigning against male violence towards women. Its website: <http://maschileplurale.it/cms/> There are also women and feminist intellectuals, and other groups that work on this issue. In the next chapter I will dedicate more space to the analyses of these groups.

<sup>65</sup> In the statistics gathered by Itanes (*Italian National Election Studies*), in the 2008 national election the percentage of women voting for the PDL, Berlusconi's party, is higher than the percentage of men. It is also higher than women who voted for other right wing and left wing parties. All the results of the statistics can be find here: <http://www.termometropolitico.it.cloud.seeweb.it/>

<sup>66</sup> In applying a gender approach to the analysis of Italian populism, I consider that the social construction of the relationship between the sexes is based on the socially-constructed nature of masculinity and femininity. This means that the research focuses on the relationality between the sexes due to the conviction that women and men, and femininity and masculinity cannot be fully grasped if considered alone. (Ross 2010)

have profoundly conditioned women's political identification, their agency and their critical relation or affiliation with right wing populism today.

In accomplishing this, I will make a genealogy of images which depict women as allegoric symbols of the Italian nation, pointing out the continuities and discontinuities between past and present images. The sources of these images are political posters<sup>67</sup> which were designed during Fascism, then at the beginning of the Italian Republic (1946), in the seventies and lastly in the last Regional Election (2010)<sup>68</sup>.

### **3.2 Women's bodies as 'popular-national' fetishes**

In Italian political history, female representations have been symbolically used to define national power and the exclusion/inclusion of women as political subjects. The construction of the Italian nation has from the very beginning been a gendered discourse. In particular, in the eighteen and nineteen centuries, with the hegemony of the bourgeois, feminine images became central in the construction of nationalism. Due to the deeply hierarchical relation between women and men which made it possible only for men to participate in the public and political sphere, women were locked within the domestic walls. However the female body and its representation assumed an important public role. It was used to create patriotism, to facilitate men in bonding with the abstract concept of nationalism. For this reason, the nation was represented through using the female body and different female representations – the protective mother, the erotic ideal, a fragile woman. Each of these images could touch male desires and fantasies and create a male bond with the nation.

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<sup>67</sup> Although in Italy nowadays political messages, programmes and campaigns tend to be expressed mainly through television, the poster still continues to play an important role in political propaganda. In particular in Italy the potential impact and effectiveness of the posters are considerable: "The poster is, arguably, a quintessentially Italian medium. Its widespread use as a means of mobilization may in fact be explained in the light of the Catholic Church's centuries-old tradition of using artistic forms for persuasive ends (both religious and political). It should be moreover related to the outdoor nature of the much of recreational life in Italy; the ritual of the passeggiata alone justifies the parties' investment in this form of communication". (Luciano Cheles 2001: 124). The poster then has provided political movements with strong visual characterizations, specifically through the depiction of party emblems, party leaders and ideological symbolizations. Female representations have been playing an important role in the expression of the different political ideals and the models to identify with.

<sup>68</sup> The majority of the images used in this chapter come from different political blogs, political candidate's websites and party archives found in the Internet. Some of them come from the book: *The art of persuasion. Political communication in Italy from 1945 to the 1990s* by Cheles Luciano and Sponza Lucio (2001), Manchester University Press. New York.

In Italy since the 'Risorgimento' the representation of women has been a central issue in the popular imaginary and any political force and movement have tried to adopt female representations for political propaganda. Women were the symbol of the young generation's enthusiasm for the national unification struggle. From this period the Reign 'Italia' emerges as a woman who allegorically expresses fecundity, justice, patriotism. This, however, didn't change women's political condition: they continued to remain excluded from an active participation in politics. It is with Fascism that women seriously entered into the political rhetoric of nationalism. Mussolini's discourses have been able at various times to appeal to large numbers of women as the political activists of Fascism. Fascist dictatorship defined the place of women in ambivalent and ambiguous ways: both in terms of segregation and political mobilization. On the one hand, women were seen as the mothers of the fascist '*prole*' whose role was only to procreate and take care of the family. On the other hand women were put together in fascist female organizations to be subjects of fascist political mobilization. Victoria De Grazia (1993) says that in a way fascist regime promised women modernity, yet denied them emancipation.



Fascist regime's poster 1926: "National day of motherhood and children"



Fascist Regime's poster 1944. The S.A.F (*Servizio ausiliario femminile*) is a female army, that was born in the spring 1944 to support Mussolini during the times of the *Repubblica di Salò*.

After the Fascist regime's fall, the years of the new Italian Republic offered different political representation of women. During the post-war period Italian women became the fulcrum of collective narrations like neo-realist portrayals, which freed them from centuries of invisibility. In films produced in those years women still appeared wearing traditional clothes, but proud to be able to contribute to the creation of a new political order. Images of women from all social classes and ages made the front pages, while for the very first time they were about to vote in local elections and then in the 1946 referendum, choosing between monarchy or republic. Women bore witness to the active role they played in battle of liberation from Nazi-Fascism and were the symbol of an inclusive democracy wishing to also create a new public sphere they could freely access. A republican constitution came into force on 1st January 1948 that asserted the equality between women and men. Yet, the political rhetoric of women's role in society didn't change so much from fascist discourse. This is in fact visible in the political narrations of the main parties active immediately after the fascist regime's fall. The Christian Democrats, in particular, focused on image of woman similar to the fascist rhetoric. In fact, women remained primarily represented as mother and symbol of heterosexual family even after they obtained the right to vote (Fig.1 and fig. 2). The image of the peasant woman, holding one of her two children on one arm recalls the image of the Virgin and child. The use of Christian iconography is justified due to an awareness of the pivotal role of religion in Italian culture and the awareness that it could be a way of reaching the people.



Fig.1



Fig.2

In the Christian democrats' political propaganda the visualization of women was implicated in a broader discourse of Italian nationalism: women represented the biological reproducers of the nation and at the same time the active transmitters of the Christian culture, based on conservative gender roles. Women's participation in society was limited to the role of wife and mother.

In the next images women, to symbolize the strong political battle between DC and Communist party, have been represented as the symbolic signifiers of different ideologies within the nation (Fig. 3, 4). In the DC posters, the communist enemy is personified by a monster in the first image and by a hand holding the hammer and the sickle in the second poster. In both images the allegoric depictions of communism act as a threat of violence against a woman, who represents in the first case a peasant woman and in the second case 'Italia'. 'Italia' is a woman whose values are 'Patria, Famiglia, Liberta'.



Fig. 3



Fig.4

The gendering characteristic of these national narratives is also clear in the next images which connect the representation of femininity and the parties' values. In 1963 the DC produced a poster (fig 5) to celebrate its 20 years' existence. The aim was to rejuvenate the image of the party. In it a young lady dressed in white is holding a bouquet of flowers. This poster shows a completely different image compared to the Virgin Mary-like appearance of the female peasant: the lady is young, pretty, elegant. Neither is there any reference to the role of mother and wife. But there is continuity

with the traditional DC values. She is dressed in white, a color symbolic of innocence, virginity and Catholic religion (Cheles and Sponza 2001)



Fig.5

In another poster (fig. 6) the reference to femininity is explicit and the Christian democratic woman is depicted as an elegant, tall and slender figure, a female representation typical of fashion magazines. She is juxtaposed to a corpulent and short Communist woman that seems to be part of the peasant or working-class stock. The text warned women that their femininity was at risk if they voted for the Communist party. These posters have been made in the fifties and sixties, a period when Italy was living through a considerable economic boom and cultural transformation. Petit-bourgeois values became hegemonic and consequently also the discourse on femininity changed. In particular, Hollywood and 'Italian Cinema'<sup>69</sup>, and the broadcasting of public television with their stars have challenged the women's traditional images which were used in political discourses. In both posters DC attempts to colonize this cultural transformation and make it a strategic tool with which to attack their political adversaries. The corpulent and short woman also

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<sup>69</sup> In the 50' and 60' cinema stars like Gino Lollobrigida, Sophia Lauren and Silvia Mangano challenged the common idea of Italian femininity. Their acting roles and 'pin up' femininity diffused an ideal of women distant from the rural and traditional feminine activities. Their beauty and bodies were more the manifestations of the new era, where men and women had new aspirations in term of economical and social possibilities. In fact in those years several Italians left the countryside and moved to the big cities due to the fast urbanization, economical development and consumerism characterizing Italian society (Gundle 2007). This relation between cinema and entertainment and the change of femininity representations in politics will be quite important also in later decades. In fact we will see how, since the eighties, in particular television deeply influenced popular culture and the representations of women in Italian society.

symbolizes communism's antagonism toward bourgeois capitalism and liberalism's values which became hegemonic in the post-war period (Cheles and Sponza 2001)



Fig. 6

The communist party also focused its political propaganda on a certain representation of femininity. In the poster dedicated to the “week of the female comrade” by the communist party's Parma branch (Fig. 7), the female representation is highly symbolic:

The image of the audacious young woman transfixing an octopus symbolizing war injustice, oppression, ignorance and poverty –as the inscriptions on the tentacles make clear- with the pole of her red flag is modeled on the popular genre of St Michael/St George slaying the snake/dragon. The celebration of the *compagna's* heroic fight against the evils of society has been reinforced by reference to the story of David and Goliath: the position of her left arm echoes, in fact, the gesture of defiance featuring in Donatello's and Verrocchio's famous bronze statues of the biblical hero[...] The arm (or arms) akimbo, suggesting boldness and self-assurance, was also Mussolini's most characteristic posture. The artist, who designed the poster only a year or so after the collapse of Fascism, is unlikely to have been unaware of this ambiguity. (Cheles 2001: 128)

In this description it is interesting to note the connection that Cheles made between the female image and fascism. In fact, the virile aspects of the fascist heroes, the youthful vitality, the strength, the boldness and self-confidence are embodied by the female figure. But these typical male references are diminished by the explicit sensuality of the woman's body. The free-floating hair and the visible breasts are an allegory of liberty and sexual and social emancipation. The accentuated/visible

breasts instead symbolize prosperity. In this image we see again that female representations fulfill allegoric functions and the use of the image's color seeks to bring to the fore the ideal of patriotism (woman's green dress together with the red flag and the white background resemble the tricolor). Moreover the image of the attractive woman also enters the realm of male sexual fantasies. The woman therefore embodies a role as an active participant in the national struggle, in this case a struggle for communism.



Fig.7

Female representations have varied in the history of Italian First Republic's political propaganda, especially after the struggles of the feminist movement and its political achievements. The posters showed the radical change which happened in relation to women's participation in politics: women were politically active, independent from the role of mother and wife and they were discussing of bringing women's issues into politics (fig.8, fig.9).





Fig. 8 Christian Democrats poster ‘Come with us. The real revolution constructs, it doesn’t destroy’



Fig.9 Socialist Party poster, 1982. “From the women’s movement to women on the move.”

However, it is worth to point out some general aspect concerning the relation between women and patriotism. The DC and PCI, the two biggest Italian parties from the 1946 to the end of the eighties, have used female representations to produce a certain narrative of Italy as a nation. In this regard we can say that both the parties have gendered their discourse on the nation. And female representations were mirroring the contradictory rhetorics of nostalgia for the past and progressiveness employed in the Italian nationalist discourse. This means that, for instance, the Madonna-like peasant, represented as the atavistic and authentic body of national tradition, was an expression of religious-conservative principles and a nostalgia for the Italian peasant tradition. The image of the communist sensuous woman was instead a reflection of national progressiveness, a challenge to the tradition, a discontinuity with the past. These examples confirm that women have been appealed to as markers of Italian national identity. In these images we can see what Yuval Davis (2007) identifies as one of the main characteristics of women’s participation in nationalism. The catholic and communist women were appealed with these images to be “active transmitters and producers of national culture” although at the same time their bodies continued to fulfill the realm of male sexual fantasies. Today Italian political posters still appeal to

these imaginaries. If we examine some political posters produced for the last Regional electoral campaign, we can notice some continuity with the past. The graphic design of the posters changed from the seventies and eighties: images of the candidate prevail, and the political slogans resemble more the language of advertisements. However, in the female candidates' poster, the gendered characterization of the image remains still quite evident. Women are still represented as either mothers or sexually attractive political figures (fig. 10 e fig.11)



Fig.10



Fig.11

The poster of the “Verdi” (fig.10), the Italian green party, underlines the motherly role of the candidate. This image wants to symbolize the reliability of the candidates, in contrast to the political elite’, all the men depicted in dark colors on the background are a symbol of corruption. In the other poster (fig.11), instead, there is the actual Minister of Equal Opportunities Mara Carfagna. Her face is at the centre of the image. There are no references to the political adversaries. The voter’s eye firstly interacts with Carfagna’s image that put in evidence her beauty, elegance and institutional role (signified by the Italian and European flags behind her face). The visual pleasure that derives from looking at Carfagna’s body, the smiles that blinks at the voter and the composition of the entire image might transmit this message: her political success and empowerment (from showgirl to Minister) come from her political activism in Berlusconi’s party. Carfagna’s candidature was presented during

the electoral campaign for the new Governor of Campania Region. And her visual political campaign worked. Indeed Mara Carfagna was the most voted for candidate in the Naples' electoral district, thus significantly contributing to the victory of the actual right wing Governor Stefano Caldoro.

Lega Nord also uses female representations for political reasons but with a specific ideological purpose (fig.12). In this case the gender element of the image becomes racialized. Italian women are appealed to become – using Yuval- Davis terms- symbolic signifiers of national difference and, as in poster below, racist signifiers. In the Lega Nord's poster women's images are adopted to reinforce the discourse concerning the 'clash of civilization' between Christianity and Islam and 'European-ness' and 'Other-ness'.



Fig.12 Lega Nord's poster. "Do y wanna really take a risk? No to Turchia's entry into Europe"

The populist rhetoric of the antagonism 'we'/'they' frames the images of the poster. The victimized woman with the headscarf, who suffers behind the bars of a prison is juxtaposed with the picture of two 'western women' who are successfully at work. The "Western women" of course stand for the democratic European community, whose values and rights might be under threat by the entrance of Turkey into the EU. It is worth noting that this racist propaganda is not only the prerogative of the xenophobic Lega Nord. Women as racist signifiers have become part of the populist rhetoric of other European right wing parties. In Switzerland, the SVP party

(Schweizerische Volkspartei) publicizes the images below in its campaign against migration (fig. 13).



Fig.13

The racist message of the campaign derives by assembling these two images together. The white, naked and sexy women in limpid waters are in contraposition of the image of older women, who are swimming dressed and they are smoking and chatting in darker waters. The entire image then is constructed through the dichotomy of light/dark, purity/dirty, sexy/unappealing. It seems that the SVP party wants to evoke the purity and beauty of Swiss women using an image of naked appealing bodies, in contraposition to the unattractive, dark image of migrant female bodies. In this poster the fetishization and eroticization of female bodies is striking, especially for its apparent goal of reinforcing the binary discourse of “West and the rest”<sup>70</sup> that legitimizes racism, xenophobia and European uniqueness. Moreover, it also shows how the power of imagery is exploited to form opinions, and the way such power is employed to articulate the ‘popular-national’ identity<sup>71</sup> of European countries.

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<sup>70</sup> This is a reference to the title of the book by Stuart Hall (1996), ‘The west and the rest: discourse and power’. He analyzes the construction of western discourse, which he argues utilizes a binary logic of “West and the Rest” to emphasize European uniqueness and the inferiority of non-western cultures. Hall argues that the construction of the concept “the West” derives from the necessity to classify different societies and condense a complicated set of images and peoples into a simple abstract category. This provides a “standard model of comparison” and satisfies “criteria of evaluation against which other societies may be ranked”. This concept thus “became productive in its turn” constituting knowledge about other cultures, traditions and spaces. In this way differences function as the markers of ‘the west’. “The difference of these societies and cultures from the West was the standard against which the West’s achievement was measured. It is in the context of these relationships that the idea of the “West” took on meaning (...) national cultures acquire their strong sense of identity by contrasting themselves with other cultures.”

<sup>71</sup> I use the Gramscian term ‘popular-national’ to underline that the discourse of western superiority, developed especially in times of colonialism, is still part of the European ‘common sense’ or better is still hegemonic in several national imaginaries (Said 1978, Bhabha 1986, hooks 1992, McClintock 1995)

The SVP's racist political propaganda is also an example of how female beauty<sup>72</sup> comes to be represented as a prerequisite to national identity and a justification of nationalist claims. Like in Switzerland, Italian politics exploits images of female beauty in the construction of Italian national identity. Yet, In Italy this practice has its own specificity. As Stephen Gundle (2007) argues, for different social, cultural and psychological reasons, compared to northern European men, the Italians appreciate women more for their female physical beauty that they have a strong desire to enjoy. This obsession is reflected in the continuous male projection, elaboration and definition of the "Italian female beauty" that needs to conform to the erotic male fantasy and also the values of the nation, and consequently to be the object of desire and at the same time represent the mother of the Italians, the reproductive agent of the Italian ethnos. It is not a coincidence that even today the national beauty contest 'Miss Italia' is an important national media event. The contest, born in 1946 and broadcasted by the public television channel 'Rai' in four consecutive evenings, perpetrates the spectacularization of male national fantasy on 'la piu' bella tra le Italiane' [the most beautiful woman within Italian female participants]<sup>73</sup>.

Less popular but very participated in is also 'Miss Padania', a beauty contest that Lega Nord has organized for thirteen years. 'Miss Padania' selects women to represent Padania's beauty and to embody the ideals of the Lega Nord party. The participants can win different titles:

"Miss Padania: è legata alle caratteristiche estetiche e culturali della ragazza del Nord. Elegante e realista, è ancorata alle certezze e alla tradizione." [Miss Padania: she is linked to

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<sup>72</sup> By beauty we consider the totality of the ideal physical qualities specific of an ethnic group or population, connected to a precise beauty type that obtains cultural and popular approbation by Italian citizens. These qualities have to be accepted by anyone and they have to be presented periodically through new femininity examples, new female representations.

<sup>73</sup> The 1996 edition of Miss Italia became an important event in the history of the beauty contest and Italian popular culture. For the first time, a black woman, Anna Mendez, won the competition. Some journalists and members of the jury criticized the fact that a black woman could represent the Italian female beauty. Others accept Mendez's victory because they were afraid of being labeled as racist or conservative. However, this event created a huge polemic about Italian identity and ethnicity. As Gundle (2007) explains, the polemic towards Mendez was the result of the fact that Italian society never put in discussion their colonial past in Africa and its relation with the new migrants. In fact, in the Italian popular conscience the idea of Italian white superiority was never deconstructed or seriously criticized. For this reason, the victory of Mendez has been considered a serious threat to the popular vision of Italian (white) identity.

the characteristic esthetic and culture of the northern girl. Elegant and realist, she is anchored to certainties and tradition]

“Miss Sole delle Alpi: è dotata di creatività e si ribella al banale. Solare, persuasiva e stimolante, esprime felicità, ottimismo e amore per tutto quanto la circonda” [Miss Alpi’s Sun: she is creative and rebels against banality. Shiny, persuasive and exciting, she expresses felicity, optimism and love for everything that surrounds her]

“Miss Camicia Verde è, invece, maliziosa, combattiva e rivoluzionaria. È interprete del risveglio della gente del Nord” [Miss Green Shirt: she is instead malicious, a fighting and revolutionary person. She represents the rise up of the Northern people].<sup>74</sup>

Each title’s description manifests the intention of ‘Miss Padania’ organizers to use female bodies to express the values, desires and passions connected with the construction of Lega’s patriotism. Consequently, the recruitment of women should satisfy Lega’s members’ expectation of the ideal-typical female representative of Padania’s community. The women candidates thus have to be expressions of physical health, racial and national vigor, and moral purity. The Art. 5 of Miss Padania’s policy affirms that only women<sup>75</sup> resident in Padania<sup>76</sup> for more than 10 years can participate in the contest. Moreover the participants have to demonstrate that they have never been involved in acts against morality and they have never declared opinions against the political ideals of the movements which support ‘Padania’.

‘Miss Padania’ represents one the most interesting examples of populist interpellation. Women are appealed to participate in the beauty contest in order to symbolize an imaginary ‘Padania beauty’ in return for a possible career on TV and a short moment of popularity<sup>77</sup>. At the same time, the male desire of Lega’s members is

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<sup>74</sup> Miss Padania’s website: [www.misspadania.com](http://www.misspadania.com)

<sup>75</sup> In Miss Padania’s policy it is explicitly requested to present the personal registration certificate. Women thus have to demonstrate to have the same sex as registered on the birth certificate.

<sup>76</sup> The ‘Padania’ that is an imaginary collectivity created by Lega Nord, geographically includes the northern side of Italy and some centre regions: Lombardia, Piemonte, Valle d’Aosta, Liguria, Veneto, Trentino A.A, Friuli V.G., Emilia-Romagna, Marche, Umbria, Toscana.

<sup>77</sup> Miss Padania is transmitted on TV through a national broadcasting called ‘Rete4’ owned by Berlusconi’s Mediaset group. The beauty contest’s jury is composed of famous journalists and television stars who are looking for new models or show-girls. Moreover in Italy the popularity of beauty contests between young women is high. Female beauty in fact is an aspect so crucial in the mass media and popular culture].

satisfied by the gazing at hundreds of young pretty girls. The female bodies become thus political fetishes of the male fantasy.

The cases of Miss Padania and the publicity of the Swiss SVP party show that women are appealed as ‘commodity spectacle’ (Mc Clintock 1997) of national and populist rhetoric. Their bodies attract audience and publicity, they are used to seduce and manipulate the electorate and buy their voters. Paraphrasing Mc Clintock's sentence, a sense of nationalist and populist identity might be transmitted and experienced through fetish objects (cuisine, flags, anthems, monuments, landscapes), through the organization of collective fetish spectacles (football, military parades, different forms of popular culture such as television events like ‘Miss Italia’ and ‘Miss Padania’) and, we would add, through the fetish of female bodies (the Italian ‘gnocche’ or the white Swiss bottoms).

Up to now we have analyzed some images, symbols and events which explain the actual hegemonic representation of masculinity and femininity in Italian politics. Virility, machismo, women's objectification, the fetishism of female bodies are some of the keywords to understand what kind of gender and racial representations populism has conveyed to recruit Italian voters. However, it would be a mistake to not take in consideration the role of television and advertisement in producing and reinforcing a certain view of gender relations in Italian society. In Italy indeed the role of television is extremely influential in political opinion and the making of public debate<sup>78</sup>. I want to deepen the investigation on the power of televised images to form opinions and the way such power is employed to depict women and men. This analysis however has to be framed in a context where Silvio Berlusconi is the biggest media tycoon in Italy, controlling the main national private and public televisions. This is where television and populism intertwined in the production of imaginaries, desires and in the representation of gender relations<sup>79</sup>.

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<sup>78</sup> Censis (Italian Institute of Socio-Economic Research) has pointed out that in the last Regional election (summer 2010) television has remained the main *medium* used by Italians to develop their own political opinion. Only a quarter of the population has chosen newspapers and only one in ten has read the political parties' programmes. Internet still remains a source of political information only for young generations. You can find this publication on [www.censis.it](http://www.censis.it)

<sup>79</sup> It is important to note that, in general, mass media have significantly promoted the rise of populism not only in Italy but also internationally. Mazzoleni (2003) indeed explains that internationally mass media have a strong influence in endorsing and opposing populist stances and policies. Media institutions and their content may voice sectional populist claims. He describes that popular media, such as tabloid newspapers, talk-radio and infotainment television news have provided coverage of populist movements, focusing on the personality of political leaders, on entertainment gossip, on conflicting political debates. This is because popular media are more sensitive to the audience ratings

### 3.3 The power of image, sexism and populist rhetoric

Berlusconi's media empire has been a laboratory for creating political support for right wing populism (Rodota 1994, Doyle 2001, Guarino and Ruggeri 1997). As many authors have explored the Prime Minister has seriously influenced, determined and manipulated popular tastes and demands through his broadcasting TV channels' programmes, newspapers and gossip magazines.

However only recently attention has been given to how Berlusconi's television channels have contributed to reinforcing sexism towards women in Italian culture<sup>80</sup>, which opened up a terrain of political consensus as concerns the Prime Minister's sexist discourses.

It is worth mentioning that Mediaset's television network has been the first to introduce images of naked women or hyper sexualized femininities with the goal of increasing its audience<sup>81</sup>. This mechanism has been fully explained by the

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and consequently they display different degrees of 'media populism' such as responding to popular tastes and demands. In Italy 'media populism' is an endemic phenomenon that crosses different mass media and especially characterizes commercial television. Berlusconi's TV channels play an important role in the creation and diffusion of popular and populist sentiments within society.

<sup>80</sup> Marina Calloni (2009) gives an interesting historical reconstruction of the women's role on TV since the diffusion of commercial channels. When in 1984 the Prime Minister Bettino Craxi, who, issuing a Ministerial Decree, allowed private networks to broadcast all over the national territory, the competition between State and commercial broadcasting networks found a joint interest precisely in the representation of (neo-)traditional female roles. Interest in promoting goods to a broader audience became the prime objective, based on the mistaken equation that a larger audience meant a lower level of cultural interest. The regression of viewing became equal to the commercialisation of the female body, in a hotchpotch of buying and selling wishes. Eroticization, bordering on pornography, once again made women's bodies a public arena mystifying the object on sale and moved to new settings the market's imperatives. This trend became radicalised during the Nineties. Feminine beauty became the sine qua non condition for all successful programmes, to the detriment of professional capabilities. Women became successful above all as entertainers, without however having many intellectual capabilities and qualities to show. Women improvised as "commentators", not so much because of their expertise on specific subjects, but rather thanks to their shameless ability to increase verbal brawls or to ridicule crucial issues.

<sup>81</sup> There are several studies on how commercial television exploits sexist images to sell products or programmes. They point out that since the beginning of the nineteenth century the production of desire by commodities' advertisements has been connected to the massive diffusion of erotic and sexual femininity. With the consolidation of consumer culture the overlap of feminine bodies and commodities has become an important visual aspect of western culture. This process created a sort of fusion between femininity, show-business and scopophilia that nowadays is the main feature of publicity's visual language (Gundle 2007, Pollock 2003, Hall 1997). Consequently commercial networks, which generate their revenue through selling advertising space, have applied these mechanisms. As a consequence there is a fetishism of female bodies and a diffusion of consumerist desires. However, there are few analyses that question the fusion between femininity, show-business and scopophilia as main elements of political propaganda.



documentary “Videocracy” by Eric Gandini (2009)<sup>82</sup>. The director, analyzing some images, characters and TV programs produced by Berlusconi’s TV, has pointed out how the exposure of an erotic femininity has become a functional mechanism for the success of Berlusconi’s televisions.

The film starts by showing some images from the first Italian commercial television at the end of the seventies. Some men are seated around a table and answer the calls of the spectator calling from home. Close to the table is seated a woman with a mask on her face. She performs a strip-tease according to the successfulness of the answers of the spectators. The woman is introduced as a housewife.

Gandini, in presenting this scene, wants to show the power of voyeurism on TV. The mask that allows the woman to remain anonymous to the public becomes the symbol of shame and voyeurism. Spectators are expected to watch the programme because there is a woman who unveils herself, a woman who becomes a silent, faceless body without any agency. This clip reveals that since the beginning of Berlusconi’s commercial television, its success has been based on the relation between desire, image and the female body. This relation continues to exist and it is stronger today. All day in talk-shows or entertainment programs, there is a constant representation of extremely sexualized and beautiful young women, who most of the time are silent or victims of the male anchorman’s jokes. These images reinforce the objectification of women’s bodies and the stereotypes of women’s role in Italian TV: sexy dolls and stupid brains. They also provide a sexist frame to the usually not as beautiful and under-dressed male working partners: these showmen, journalists and politicians are automatically interpellated as compulsory heterosexuals. In fact, taking in consideration Slavoj Žižek’s argument that men are positioned and objectified also by their own gazing at women, men who gaze at under-dressed women on television are positioned as heterosexual individuals: they must gaze at and objectify women while being gazed at and objectified by the television (fig. 15).

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<sup>82</sup> Videocracy has been presented at Venice film festival in 2009. The movie’s trailer can be watched at the website: [www.atmo.se/film-and-tv/videocracy/](http://www.atmo.se/film-and-tv/videocracy/)



Fig. 15

This mechanism has been also revealed by the documentary “Il Corpo delle donne” by Lorella Zanardo<sup>83</sup>. The image above is a still from this documentary, which was realized with amateur means and focuses on the hyper sexualized femininity that Italian television promotes and the implied sexual availability of the female bodies showed on TV. I mention this documentary because it has the merit of having unmasked television’s ‘bardic function’ –Van Zoonen’s concept- which means that television transforms reality, in this case sexism towards women, into an unquestionable ritual of everyday viewing. In other words it has unveiled what Giovanna Zapperi calls the “intrinsic correlation between the visual field and the relation of dominations”:

Esiste infatti una correlazione intrinseca tra il campo del visivo e quello dei rapporti di dominio., specialmente ogniqualvolta il fatto di essere nell’immagine denota una posizione segnata da una differenza, da un’alterita’ che appare reificata dallo sguardo che costruisce. Si potrebbe affermare in questo senso che l’immagine e’ proprio il luogo in cui le differenze, siano essere di genere o di razza, si articolano con la potenza degli stereotipi[...] (Zapperi 2010: p.1)

[There exists an intrinsic correlation between the visual field and the relations of domination, especially whenever the fact of being in the picture shows a position marked by a difference, by an ‘otherness’ that is reified by the gaze that builds the image. You could say in this sense that the image is the place where differences, which can be gender or race differences, are articulated by the power of stereotypes]

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<sup>83</sup> This amateur documentary was produced in 2009. The film shows several shots of different television programmes demonstrating the ordinary scenes of women’s humiliation. The film can be watched and downloaded at the website: [www.ilcorpodelledonne.net/](http://www.ilcorpodelledonne.net/)

Images therefore constitute the space where gender or race differences are reified and articulated in a way which allows them to become powerful stereotypes. Berlusconi profits of the gender stereotypes propagated by his television. Let's consider the Prime Minister's sex scandals and his homophobic jokes<sup>84</sup>. In other European countries these would have led to the Prime Minister's resignation. In Italy, however, Berlusconi hasn't resigned because he feels confident of his popularity which remains high with the Italian electorate<sup>85</sup> despite such stunts. The reason of his success is due to the fact that, since Berlusconi's entry into politics, the majority of Italian voters have become the consumers of the spectacularization of Italian politics. As Federico Boni explains, the Prime Minister has been able to intertwine the spectacularization and personalization of political leadership in a way which makes him a 'consumption object'. Boni adds that this is possible because the Prime Minister has a 'mediatized body' which is a body that is available for any kind of representation.

The same figure of Berlusconi is complex, heterogeneous and kaleidoscopic: Berlusconi really personifies everything: he is a coach, tycoon, singer, worker, housewife, saint, real estate speculators and so on. [my translation] (Boni 2008: 11)

Berlusconi therefore feeds into mainstream expectations of entertainment, spectacle and beauty in order to capture and hold public attention. In terms of masculine representation the Prime Minister copies the role of the 'Tronista' (the person who seats on the throne) which is a famous character created by Mediaset's television programme 'Uomini e donne'. The 'Tronista' is a bachelor who is looking for a mate. He usually behaves like a macho man, sitting on his throne and enjoying the spectacle of different female candidates flirting with him and fighting to become his partner. Berlusconi plays the same role. He dresses the part of the exaggerated, stereotypical male figure, which is typified by his attitude towards women. As Elsrakbi (2010) points out, the Prime Minister enlists support by behaving inappropriately, appealing to a

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<sup>84</sup> Recently during a public meeting the Prime Minister said: "Meglio appassionato di belle ragazze che gay" (better loving pretty girls than being gay). Berlusconi express this homophobic sentence to justify a new sex scandal which sees him having an affair with girl who is a minor.

<sup>85</sup> Different Italian and European newspapers (La Repubblica, El Pais, Le Monde) have reported that the popularity index for the Italian Prime Minister has decreased from 2008 to 2010 (from 62% in October 2008 to 38% in May 2010). However, the popularity of Silvio Berlusconi is still quite high (at around 40%) if we take into account all the corruption and sex scandals he has been involved in since the beginning of his term.

specific macho character of the Italian male. Even in political speeches he revels in an image of a naughty boy who disregards the rules, which can count on popular appeal and draws him closer to his public. In 2008, he went as far as selecting the former topless model and showgirl, Mara Carfagna to serve in his parliament as “Minister of equal opportunities”<sup>86</sup>. And in 2009 he repeated the same mechanism, selecting other showgirls or escorts as new right wing candidates running for the European Parliament election. His affairs, cheating and mistresses are played out under the media spotlight like the actions of an alpha male. Money, sex and power are an explosive erotic game show in Italian mediatized politics. The Prime Minister’s masculinity and sexuality therefore resembles a popular show that everyday attract millions of Italian spectators<sup>87</sup>.

What are the effects of the blurring between televised images of hyper-sexualized women or virile masculinity and politics on Italian political culture? The Italian writer Roberto Bui (2010), in considering Berlusconi’s sex scandals, his homophobic jokes, and the exploitation of women as the fleshy decorations of his populism, says that:

*‘Power has become pornocratic. Porn has spectacularly overflowed the boundaries it occupied as a genre of popular culture. The ‘Burlesquoni’-controlled Italian TV is chock full of naked bodies, mountains of tits and asses (...) this shows to what extent ‘Burlesquonism’ based its power on the hyper-sexualization of daily life’*

Roberto Bui points out that the process of the hyper-sexualization of daily life has become part of political institutions, parties and institutional publicity in Italy. Politicians as well as the managers of public corporations or of universities have all

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<sup>86</sup> The next chapter will explore the effect of this new wave of young right wing politicians on Italian politics. These women have a political language very different from the women’s political intervention in the 70s and 80s. Some journalists consider this as an important signal of post-feminism, or a ‘backlash’ towards women’s emancipation struggle. I will deeply debate this in the following pages.

<sup>87</sup> One might question why people are attracted by such sexist images on TV. This should be framed in terms of the rich source of arguments that Freud and psychoanalysis have provided to explain the relationship between images and their spectators or consumers. “*Visual impressions remain the most frequent pathway along which libidinal excitation is aroused*” (Freud 1927: 96, quoted in Hall 1997: 268) In this case, watching televised images can activate a process of relation with the women and men represented and the audience. The male and female spectators might desire to *have* the people on TV (which Freud calls *object cathexis*) or desire to *be* the women and men on TV (which Freud calls identification). Consequently the images of eroticized bodies might attract the desire of possession and at the same time activate a process of identification: female consumers fantasize of being like those beautiful, popular women on TV. In ‘Videocracy’ there is a scene narrating that every year thousands of teenagers participate in the auditions of the TV program ‘Striscia La Notizia’. They desire to become the new ‘velina’ of the show. ‘Velina’ is the name for showgirls who are scantily dressed and whose presence on television is due to their physical attributes.

been affected by ‘pornocratic power’. They sell female bodies, tits and bottoms to buy the attention or the votes of consumers (fig. 10, 11,12, 13).



Fig. 10

This a publicity by Massa-Carrara city’s tourist board. “I choose and you?” “Massa-Carrara: your holiday enjoying the beaches, the marble, the villages and castles.



Fig. 11

Publicity by Bologna University. “The fantastic four: Cesena, Forli, Ravenna, Rimini. The best for your university studies.



**TTT**Lines COMPAGNIA DI NAVIGAZIONE NAPOLI-CATANIA v.v. Booking on line: [www.tttlines.it](http://www.tttlines.it)

Fig.12

Publicity by a maritime transport company.” Vesuvio and Etna. Never been so closed”.



Fig.13

Political poster of the candidate Tinto Brass (Italian erotic movie director) member of the radical party. “Better an ass than a asshole”

## Conclusions

In Italian right wing populist discourse masculine representations have played a significant role in the process of identification between the voters and the political leaders. In an acknowledgment of the power of images and discourses in the processes of identification and subjectification, Bossi and Berlusconi have exploited the popular cultural imaginary of masculinity and femininity in order to appeal to the people. In this regard, I have considered how terms like ‘Celodurismo’, ‘gnocche’ and the event like ‘Miss Padania’ can be framed and what they reflect.

There is a need for historical specificity in the conceptualization of masculinities and femininities. I have analyzed how in Italian history fascism exerted an important influence on the construction of male desire, sexuality and men’s behavior towards women. This is an influence that can be also felt in the decades after the Second World War as well as today. Virility became a symbol for hegemonic masculinity. Fascist ideology, and its adoption of the conservative precepts of the Roman Catholic Church, sustained a model of a sexual ethic and family founded on a rigid hierarchy of the sexes. Only in the 70s has there been an important break with the fascist model when feminist movements challenged the representation of gender relations in Italy. During the course of the 70s and 80s, women entered into public discourse with different themes: female sexuality, the right to pleasure, equal rights and opportunities in society and politics. This challenged significantly the role of men in the family and in society but it didn’t automatically produce a transformation in the public discourse

as concerns men's views of male sexuality and masculinity. Men's heterosexuality and the hegemonic model of masculinity remained unquestioned or depicted as unchangeable and normative. Today representations of masculinity based on virility, sexual potency, heterosexuality and physical potency still appeal to the Italian electorate. Bossi and Berlusconi's political discourses interpellate the electorate through this imaginary.

However, particular versions of masculinities are also defined in relation to femininity. I have pointed out how representations of women have mostly been mobilized in politics from Fascism to nowadays. These concern two types in particular: mother of the nation and national object of male desire. Furthermore, through my analysis of Lega Nord and the Swiss SVP party's usage of representations of women, I have shown how women's bodies have also become signifiers of racism, part of the discourse on 'clash of civilizations' between Christianity and Islam and 'European-ness' and 'Other-ness'.

The main institution of popular culture, television, is also responsible for mirroring, reproducing and diffusing these hegemonic discourses of femininities and masculinities in Italian society. On TV, images of hyper sexualized women are predominant on every national channel. The consequence is that female spectators are continuously interpellated by models of femininities which are extremely eroticized, or subject to the process of pornification. In turn, men are continuously positioned as compulsory heterosexuals, objectified by their own gazing at women.

Right wing populism uses this everyday imaginary that Italians are confronted with to consolidate its sexist and xenophobic politics. In such cultural and political context, we can understand why Berlusconi's media spectacle of virility, based on sexist jokes and sex scandals, finds support and many consumers within the Italian electorate.

How do feminist thinkers deal with the widespread sexism in Italian politics and media? The next chapter will discuss the feminist contributions on this issue. Might this phenomenon be analyzed as an the attempt of right wing politics to normalize, homogenize and oppress the female body and reassert existing gender power relations which were challenged by the feminist gains of the 70s? Is this a sort of 'backlash' (Faludi 1991) phenomenon that reasserts existing gender roles in Italian society? Or is this analytical frame insufficient if this analysis takes in consideration women like the Minister of Equal Opportunities Mara Carfagna and the European parliamentarian

Barbara Matera who achieved empowerment by becoming the entrepreneurs of their own image, buying into standardized femininities and using their bodies as political tools within the parameters of neo-liberal capitalist economy? In answering these questions, the Italian case will be positioned in relation to the international debate on post-feminism and investigated in reference to other similar cases in European and worldwide politics.



## ***4. Post-Patriarchy, Post-Feminism and Backlash: Women's Subjectivity in Neo-Populist Politics***

This chapter is focused on the current debate on the widespread sexism in Italian media and politics. In particular, how Italian feminist thinkers have questioned the sexualization of mainstream culture and the connection between sex, money and power that lies at the base of Berlusconi's populism. We will look at the Italian debate around the idea of 'women's silence', post-patriarchy and that of the un-televised 'real women'. These analyses, while dealing with the sexist commodification of female bodies, don't consider the context of the neo-liberal economy and the neo-conservative agenda that have deeply challenged feminist discourses of women's agency in Italy.

This lack becomes more clear if we look at the recent wave of political activism of right wing female politicians, like Mara Carfagna, Michela Vittoria Brembilla, and Barbera Matera, who present themselves as the representatives of a new form of woman's emancipation centered around entrepreneurial individualism, youthfulness, self-confidence in the public sphere and political careerism. While talking about emancipation they promote neo-conservative policies in terms of prostitution, abortion and reproductive rights.

The question comes up: how do Italian feminisms relate with the discourse of women's agency embodied by the new wave of right wing female politicians? What is the relation between these female actors and Berlusconi's populism?

We will try and find an answer to these questions by analyzing these developments through the concepts of backlash and post-feminism. Mara Carfagna's career will be singled out as an emblematic example of right wing post-feminism and we'll use her example to verify the usefulness of these concepts.

### **4.1 Feminist reactions to widespread sexism: analyses on power and sexuality in Berlusconi's era.**

In Italy, several feminist journalists or women intellectuals have given birth to a debate on sexism in Italian society, through the centre-left and left wing newspapers "La Repubblica", "Unità" and "Il Manifesto". This media discussion arose especially

after the sex scandals involving the Prime Minister and other popular politicians and show-business people. In the spring 2009 the pictures of the Prime Minister attending the birthday party of 18-years old Noemi Letizia were published in the newspapers. Noemi Letizia confessed that she was a friend of the Prime Minister and that she met him in one of several parties organized by the Prime Minister in his villa in Sardinia. She nicknamed him “papi” (daddy). Days later such scandal arose, that as a consequence Berlusconi’s wife Veronica Lario publicly announced her decision to ask the divorce. She attacked Berlusconi’s sexual relations as “a system that sustains only the Emperor’s amusement” and it “offends all women”.

Soon afterwards, the escort Patrizia D’Addario revealed another sex scandal involving the Prime Minister: she participated in private parties held in Palazzo Grazioli, Berlusconi’s institutional residence in Rome, where, she and other female models, escorts and TV stars were involved in sexual activity with Silvio Berlusconi. The centre-left press extensively covered these scandals and even mobilized its female readers to sign a petition against Berlusconi’s sexism. The petition’s goal was to criticize in specific Berlusconi’s insult towards Rosy Bindi, the female president of the opposing ‘Partito Democratico’ (the Democratic Party). During a live broadcast of the Italian talk show ‘Porta a Porta’, the Prime Minister said to her: “You are more beautiful than you are intelligent”.

After these scandals several women started a serious debate on sexism and the condition of women in contemporary Italy, mainly in newspapers and on women’s blogs. In ‘La Repubblica’ newspaper, renowned Italian professors and intellectuals launched an appeal for the restoration of dignity to women. Columbia University professor Nadia Urbinati lamented in particular "women's silence" faced with such humiliating role models.

“Women are always the mirror of society, the most eloquent sign of the political condition in which their country is: when they die due to the violence perpetuated by a tyrannical power, or when they travel with flights paid for them to take as a present a pendant in a butterfly’s shape (the gift from Berlusconi to the women that participated in his parties SA). In their stories is reflected a tragic or pathetic condition of their country and their homes. And as in the case of female victims of a tyrant’s violence, it’s also urgent to raise the voices of criticism, complaint and disconcertment in this case. We need women's voices. Such silence poisons the air.” (Urbinati, *La Repubblica* 30-06-2009)[my translation]

The philosopher Michela Marzano from Paris Descartes University also commented on these scandals, criticizing in particular the objectification of women in politics<sup>88</sup>:

“For too long, Italy has stood by impotent and impassive, watching women being humiliated. Women, reduced to being seen as just youthful, seductive bodies, always have greater trouble becoming something other than mere bodies: “The qualities considered useful for publicity shows are transferred into essential political skills, leading to indecent confusion about gender: obedience and attractiveness become indispensable training for those who wish to stand for posts with the most responsibility” we wrote in our appeal. “These become like a burqa thrown over women’s bodies to humiliate them on television and transform them into weapons that harm both men and women alike.” (Marzano, *European Alternatives*, April 26, 2010)

These interventions provoked different responses in the newspapers ‘La Repubblica’ and ‘L’Unità’. However, the most critical interventions appeared on the independent left-wing newspaper ‘Il Manifesto’<sup>89</sup>, whose journalists organized a public assembly in Rome in October 2009, titled “Sex, power and politics”. The main critique developed by Il Manifesto’s articles and the meeting’s organizers in Rome was directed to the idea of “women’s silence” circulating within mainstream media. They argued that women have been not silent: women like Veronica Lario and Patrizia D’Addario had in fact unmasked and denounced the sexism characterizing the Prime Minister’s power. Berlusconi’s scandals, the Il Manifesto journalists added, made evident a new configuration of sexual relations, which they labeled as ‘post-patriarchy’: “*men do still have power (...) Yet, it is a power without authority, naked, like the*

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<sup>88</sup> Michela Marzano wrote the book “Sii bella and stai zitta” (2010, Mondadori publisher). She illustrates the coordinates around which to develop a new and more fruitful reflection on the contemporary woman. She describes that after the immense progress in terms of rights, equality and freedom achieved by the libertarian movement in the sixties and seventies, women now seem to count only as they appear and are forced to emulate a single, pervasive reference model, that of the “veline”. “But what do these bodies tell us, subjected to diets, plastic surgery, sports, and to our eyes? Not surprisingly, anorexia, bulimia and self-mutilation, are now a number of symptoms of the deep ‘hemorrhage of identity’ that has affected and still affects the female body”.

<sup>89</sup> The article published by Il Manifesto can be found here: [www.ilmanifesto.it/archivi/donne-e-potere/](http://www.ilmanifesto.it/archivi/donne-e-potere/). Here you can also find the audio files of the interventions made during the meeting “Sex, power and politics” in Rome in October 2009.

*misery of a traditional virility that it is provisionally being restored against the destabilization of sexual roles provoked by forty years of feminism*”<sup>90</sup>. Those present at the meeting also stated that the images of humiliated female models presented on Italian TV exist in contrast to women’s everyday resistance, creating a “gap between fiction and reality” concerning women’s life in Italian society. Thus, real women are not silent, but silenced by the media and by politics<sup>91</sup>.

As Giovanna Zapperi (2010) notes, these analyses have the merit of criticizing the sexist imagery of visual culture in Italy, but at the same time, they tend to pose “normal women” as a counter-image, as the “reality” that should replace the fictional images offered by television. Zapperi’s critique is worth quoting here:

The constant emphasis on the return to female’s authenticity lies in the belief that there is something like ‘the woman’, the real one that every woman knows she is (...) However, a search for the authentic woman', without considering the relation between the sexes and the intersubjective dimension of the mediatic imaginary, would mean to underestimate the power of images in reflecting, falsifying and also producing reality. (Zapperi 2010: 3) [my translation]

Zapperi’s analysis invites feminist thinkers to look at Berlusconi’s political and sexual relations, questioning what Prime Minister’s imaginary wants from women or how it influences women’s subjectivity.

Asking *what we want*, when we look at those images, involves a female subject capable of uniting the desires of women as such, echoing automatically the freudian question: “*What does the woman want?* (...) Yet, this question hides what appears to be the fundamental dimension of the intersubjective relationship between desire and imagination that we could sum up with the question: “*What do those pictures want from me?*” If as Žižek says, the question that constitutes the subject is not “*what do I want?*” but “*what do others want from me?*” or “*What am I to others?*”, this means that the media imaginary already provides a response to the question. (Zapperi 2010:4) [my translation]

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<sup>90</sup> These sentences are part of the invitation text of the assembly “Sex, power and politics” whose authors are Maria Luisa Boccia, Ida Dominijanni, Tamar Pitch, Bianca Pomeranzi, Grazia Zuffa (2009). [www.ilmanifesto.it/archivi/donne-e-potere/](http://www.ilmanifesto.it/archivi/donne-e-potere/).

<sup>91</sup> This is also the main argument of the already mentioned documentary “Il Corpo delle Donne” by Lorella Zanardo whose voice-over, while images of half naked, silent and hyper sexualized women appear on the screen, asks “Why do we accept this constant humiliation?”

Feminist debates should therefore focus on the popular imaginary that right wing populism has created and consolidated in Italian society, and how this influences women's experiences. The critique presented above by Urbinati, Marzano and Il Manifesto instead reflects only the idea of femininity of the women voicing it: middle-class, white, middle-aged, and highly educated. In the interventions on 'La Repubblica' and 'l'Unità', the female authors presented themselves as free and independent thinkers, while describing the majority of young women as passive spectators alienated by television. In contrast, the articles by the radical feminists writing on 'Il Manifesto' do highlight women's agency and struggles, pointing out that women have never been silent. Yet, here the claim of the final victory of Italian feminism (found in the concept of post-patriarchy) thanks to the feminist radicalism developed from 1970s difference theories<sup>92</sup> - is deeply self-referential because it only applies to a select part of the female population (the higher educated, white middle class women mentioned above).

Of course, it is remarkable that thanks to the feminist gains of the 70s, today female citizens have achieved a consciousness of the unequal sexual relations characterizing Italian society. And such collective awareness towards women's self-determination might be the reason why Veronica Lario, Patrizia Daddario and other women involved in the sex scandals have spoken out, unmasking and denouncing Berlusconi's sexism. However, these events show that women's sexuality still constitutes a strategic site of the production of patriarchal power. Patriarchy didn't lose its authority but, borrowing a term by Svetlana Slapsak, it functions as 'bricolage'. In times of cultural change and of the political and social advance of the women's movement, Svetlana says, patriarchy has always negotiated with the civil rights and freedoms of women to continue to exert control on political and economical power. In Italy, since the advent of democracy patriarchy has continuously restructured itself. Women have become increasingly free but at the same time less equal as far as their rights are concerned. The paternalistic idea of

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<sup>92</sup> In the 70s, Italian feminist theory started to develop what is called the "Teoria della differenza" (sexual difference theory). Many Italian feminist such as Carla Lonzi, the important theorist of the 70's, have long held the belief that a politics of equality ultimately promoted the continued entrapment of women in male-authored structures both politically and personally. The Italian sexual difference theory thus distances itself from the practice of equality and of equal rights which buys into the concepts of universal rights as defined by a male tradition. The well known feminist philosopher Luisa Muraro explains that such theory connects 'difference' and its positive female values with the attempt to create a female symbolic order centering around a maternal figure. This to reject the male symbol of the father on which traditional differences and binary separations are constructed (Parati and West, 2002).

women's emancipation as mothers and workers that appeared in the Fifties and the Sixties, developed into an ever increasing eroticizing of the female body during the Nineties. In between these periods there have been struggles for civil rights, liberation processes, increased access to the labor market and to education for women, but also the development of neo-liberalism as well as the crisis of the welfare state, which increasingly have reduced previously established social guarantees and provisions. Popular culture has mirrored this process. Television, for example, has been evolving from a form of social paternalism<sup>93</sup> to a global economic patriarchy with neo-populist features. The paternalistic concept of emancipation has been replaced by neo-traditionalist and neo-populist tendencies that eroticize images of women and also place them in codified roles in the era of neo-liberalism.

In Italy the eroticizing of the female body runs parallel with the decrease in social security, employment levels and social-economic rights obtained during the seventies. In the meantime, in the course of the last decade the presence of women in the world of labor has fallen and now amounts to about 46% (after Malta, the lowest among the 27 countries that are member states of the EU) and on average women earn 27% less than men<sup>94</sup>.

Today young women who prostitute themselves at the 'court' of Berlusconi, can be regarded as a perfect realization of the labour market ethic and the existential model which is imposed on the daily lives of an entire generation. Such a statement should not be understood in a metaphorical sense – as a cynical way to say that we all prostitute ourselves in one way or another for a little income - but in a more specific and precise way. Firstly because the work - and above all women's work - takes place today in a broader context of prostitution where the body (or parts of it) is always considered a potential commodity. Often in the form of the erotic - as in the commercial sector, where the woman creates surplus value that transits from her body

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<sup>93</sup> In the fifties, when the State television started to broadcast, the RAI (Italian Radio and Television) performed specific civic-pedagogic tasks and a mission founded on three pillars: education, information and entertainment. Yet, viewers were deprived of freely choosing programmes since religious beliefs were indicated as shared values, on the basis of which "common decency" should be assessed. The RAI also supported a paternalistic concept of women's emancipation. Women were portrayed as interested in reconciling their dual role and work burdens as mothers and workers. However, as neo-citizens, women still needed to be protected and educated. In the seventies, notwithstanding the controversial "emancipation" process experienced by Italian women, alongside their increasing visibility in the public sphere as well as their representation on television, forms of religion-based political censorship and misogynous sex-phobic attitudes remained dominant on TV (Calloni 2009).

<sup>94</sup> To have a wider understanding of women's living conditions in Italy, see the Global Gender Gap Report 2010 by the World Economic Forum.

to the advertised object- but not necessarily. Another example is the work of care: the exploitation is more radically embodied in the figure of the care worker, whose body is literally transformed in an object of work. The care worker doesn't sell only her working time, but her youth, strength and health. It seems a harmless moralist critique to consider Berlusconi's scandals as merely a product of the 'society of the spectacle' and the hypersexualization of women's bodies on Italian television. Without denying the role that mass media and stereotypes play in shaping the collective imagination, it is however important to note that the entrepreneurial individualist model is not only a mirage of television, but the ideology that governs the choices of the government's welfare and labour policies.

The 'Libro Bianco' (white book) written by the Labor Minister Sacconi is a text where Berlusconi's government presents its labor and socio-economical policies. It proposes that citizens have to be flexible and reinvent themselves any time the market requires it. "the more you are versatile and resourceful, the more you can have a successful career". This slogan implies that the material conditions of life depend on the subjective commitment of the individual, whatever his or her initial socio-economic conditions and possibilities are. In this model, the asymmetry of social and economical power between social actors is completely removed. This model might be applied to read the Prime Minister's scandals. The escorts involved don't represent an exception to the practices that pervade the Italian society. They just apply to the letter the labor Minister's rules: entrepreneurial individualism and the ignoring of existent power relations.

I do believe that in this patriarchal frame, we should interpret the sexism and condition of women in contemporary Italy. Women's sexuality and the commodification of female bodies become strategic assets of the refashioning of politics in the neo-populist neoliberal era.

One of the key phrases of the feminism of the seventies was "the personal is political": sexual relations have public value, too. Today, in Italy, this expression is experiencing a neo-populist appropriation. The Prime Minister has constructed his power, image and his populism precisely by blurring the border between public and private spheres. He didn't politicize the personal, as feminist and libertarian movements have done in the 60 and 70, but on the contrary, he privatized politics: the hyper-personalized leadership, the exploitation of his institutional role to promote its economic interests, the reduction of politics to reality show. The sex scandals and

the promotion of showgirls as political candidates are phenomena that are part of this privatization of politics: they mirror Berlusconi's strategy to 'seduce' and recruit the other sex for political opportunism and at the same time confirm Italian male sexual fantasies and virile imaginary. For the Prime Minister thus sexuality and the relation between the sexes become strategic assets for achieving political consensus.

Hence, the cultural feminist frameworks proposed by the most well known Italian feminist thinkers or women intellectuals no longer correspond to the experiences and desires of younger generations, who grew up with Berlusconi's populist imaginary and a society permeated by consumerism. These generations have different models of femininity and new forms of precarious labor experiences. The cultural feminist critique also doesn't take into consideration the theoretical challenges that postcolonial and third wave feminism have made with regard to the formation of women's subjectivity<sup>95</sup>. Which cultural forms and interpellations call women into beings, produce them as subject instead of ostensibly merely describing them as such?

Outside Italy, several feminists have been deeply involved in analyzing this issue. They have discussed what are the new representations and life experiences of women and feminism through media, popular culture and politics. 'Backlash' and 'post-feminism' have been the most widely used key-terms on this issue. The first one has become an oft-used term after the publication of Susan Faludi's book of the same title in 1991 that denounced a range of contemporary representations of women throughout popular culture. In its most typical appearances, the concept of 'backlash' refers to the idea that these representations of women replicate long standing sexist patterns and images, with women again being presented in an unrealistic and negative light. This development is seen as a reaction to –and rejection of – the many changes in women's lives brought about by the feminist social movement (Braithwaite 2004). 'Post feminism' in many debates, has had a similar connotation as backlash. It is referred to as an active process by which feminist gains of 70s and 80s come to be undermined (Mc Robbie 2004). I will use a broader definition of post feminism here as supplied by Stephanie Genz:

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<sup>95</sup> I refer here to the moment (beginning of the 90s) that the representational claims of second wave feminism come to be fully interrogated by post-colonialist feminist like Gayatri Spivak and Chandra Mohantywork among others, and by feminist theorists like Rosi Braidotti, Judith Butler and Donna Haraway. Under the influence of Foucault, there is a shift away from feminist interest in centralized power blocks-e.g. the State, patriarchy, law- to more dispersed sites , events and instances of power conceptualized as flows and specific convergences and consolidations of talk, discourse and attentions.



A late 20<sup>th</sup> century cultural moment that pushes us to reach beyond the boundaries, of a feminist audience and address the fact that feminist concerns have entered the mainstream and they are articulated in politically contradictory ways (Genz 2006: 337)

This definition allows me to not oversimplify (as does the idea of ‘backlash’) the complex position that contemporary female experience takes up with regard to Berlusconi’s politics and its intrinsic relationship with media structures. I believe that we should better analyze the contemporary Italian political situation and how many women relate to it as a postfeminist political moment. If we consider the concept of postfeminism not as a straightforward depolitization and colonization of feminist gains, such a term might help to find the political potential in the Italian context. First, it could clarify how women rearticulate the discourse about new femininities promoted by media and consumer culture and how they affect the process of female identification. Second, it could unveil how the process of sexualization and commodification of the bodies of women in media and popular culture has developed hand in hand with a depolitization of the left and the supremacy of neo-liberal ideology.

These two concepts have been widely criticized<sup>96</sup> and have been developed in a geopolitical context that differs from Italy (Usa, UK). However I believe that the debate around these concepts, such as the meaning and scope of feminism in relation with media, popular culture and politics, might bring new insights to the Italian feminist discussion about women’s agency in times of neo-populism. It helps us to frame the investigation on right wing female politicians who advertise themselves as the political agents of a new women’s emancipation.

In what follows this research will focus on the political career of the Italian Minister of Equal Opportunities Mara Carfagna. Mara Carfagna’s political figure is chosen here because she is, in Virginia Sapiro’s words, a ‘symbolic woman’<sup>97</sup> of the current populist political moment. As we will see in the next paragraph, she represents a

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<sup>96</sup> In her article “Politics of/and Backlash”, Ann Braithwaite responds to critiques that post feminism might be anti-feminist or anti-women, by stating that such a view usually leads to a rejection of the complexities and nuances of both contemporary feminist theory and popular culture, rather than a critical engagement with the many changes in both of these fields (Braithwaite 2004: 19).

<sup>97</sup> As Virginia Sapiro observes “When we analyze the meaning of women in politics we would be wise to understand that in an important sense we are not talking about real women but symbolic women, representatives of their gender as well as many other things” (Sapiro 1993:142, 143).

narrow set of culturally embedded symbols that characterize Italian society today. My aim will be to use Carfagna's example to grasp the complexity of contemporary female subjectivity, which is influenced by a mix of neo-liberal ideology and neo-conservative values (Catholic moralism), present in Italian populism.

#### **4.2. The new wave of right wing female politicians: backlash or postfeminism?**

A new wave of women challenging the discourse of women's emancipation has become part of the European female political leadership. Since the end of the eighties and in particular since the advent of Margaret Thatcher, the 'Iron Lady', the first female British Prime Minister and the first woman in Europe to occupy such a position, there has been an increase in the number of female politicians in European governments. This new leadership claims to have found their particular form of emancipation within the conservative and right wing European political elite. They have built up a political career combining attachment to traditional family values with a liberal, independent, youthful, pr-friendly and power hungry image. If we look outside Europe and in particular to the United States, we can see the same trend. In the last American presidential election two women were competing for two important positions: Sarah Palin as republican candidate for the vice presidency and Clinton as democratic candidate for the position of president of United States.

Observing that today in Europe the most well known and successful female politicians have been politically active or presently are active in right wing parties, this leads us to question the contradictory positions of women in right wing political movements: How can women find their own agency and space in a traditional and conservative environment? And how do right wing women exclude, include, exult or denigrate woman friendly ideologies and practices in their political spaces?

In the Italian right wing populist party 'Popolo della Liberta', female politicians have been appointed for different (but few) positions and roles in the local and national government. The most well known are Letizia Moratti, Renata Polverini, Mara Carfagna, Maria Stella Gelmini, Stefania Prestigiacomo, Giorgia Meloni and Michela Vittoria Brambilla. The last five politicians have been appointed as ministers (and they are the only female participation in a government of 24 ministers) in Berlusconi's Government since the national political elections of 2008. Compared to

the average age of Italian politicians, 56 years old<sup>98</sup>, these ministers are quite young. The youngest is G. Meloni, 33 years old. The other ministers don't exceed 45 years of age. This is part of Berlusconi's strategy to bring young faces into politics. These women are indeed the daughters of the political culture of the 'Popolo della Libertá' party: ambitious, entrepreneurial, pretty and self-confident in the public sphere. The politician who has become the most emblematic new right wing figure in Berlusconi's time is Mara Carfagna.

Political rumors and national and international media attention covered her entry into politics<sup>99</sup>. With a past career as TV showgirl and just a few years of political activity, she became the Minister of Equal Opportunities. It was not a new phenomenon that Berlusconi promoted the political candidacy of women who had been working in television<sup>100</sup>. A few examples: Iva Zanicchi, European parliamentarian since 2004, was a 'queen' of a Mediaset quiz show. Gabriella Carlucci and Claudia Gilardini, currently Italian parliamentarians, have a past as respectively showgirl and actrice on both public and private television. Then there is Alessandra Meloni, former Miss Italia and now European parliamentarian. The Prime Minister's party has always played the strategic card by involving in politics popular names from television, characters already well known and appreciated by the public opinion. The purpose is to attract public votes more easily. Yet, Mara Carfagna has had her own peculiarity in this mechanism. Her candidacy has seriously influenced the electorate's perception of women involved in institutional politics. To understand this development, we need to first look at Mara Carfagna biography<sup>101</sup>: she participated in the "Miss Italia" concourse in 1997, becoming one of the finalists. Due to her participation, she started to work for several TV shows both in Rai and in Mediaset. In 2004 she started her

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<sup>98</sup> See the report by the "Fondazione Rodolfo Benedetti", available for download at: [www.frdb.org/images/customer/exec\\_summary\\_1\\_ita.pdf](http://www.frdb.org/images/customer/exec_summary_1_ita.pdf)

<sup>99</sup> Several International newspapers have dedicated articles to the Italian Minister of Equal Opportunities. The Dutch 'De Telegraaf', the Mexican 'Noticieros Televisiva', the 'Daily Mail', the German newspaper 'Bild' have all focused on the beauty and the former activity of Mara Carfagna as showgirl. The "Bild" has also proclaimed Mara Carfagna the most beautiful minister in the world.

<sup>100</sup> In Italy there is often been a revolving door relation between people from show-business and politics (and vice versa), even before (but with less profile) Berlusconi's governments. Radical right wing politicians Alessandra Mussolini, the 'Duce's granddaughter, was an actrice and a model before entering into politics. In the eighties, the pornstar Llona Staller (Ciciolina) ran for parliament and was elected parliamentarian. A few years later, she launched the 'Partito dell'Amore' party together with another famous pornstar, Moana Pozzi. The former Lega Nord member and President of the Chamber of Deputies during Berlusconi's first legislature, shifted her political career from politics to television, becoming a popular TV presenter.

<sup>101</sup> [www.maracarfagna.net](http://www.maracarfagna.net)

career in politics, being part of Forza Italia and coordinating the female movement “Azzurro Donne”<sup>102</sup> that has the aim of collecting female experiences, ideas and political proposals within Berlusconi’s party. Then, in 2006, she has been elected parliamentarian in the national political elections (Prodi’s legislature) and in 2008 she became Minister of Equal Opportunities of Berlusconi’s Government.

The party’s colleagues, the political opposition’s members and newspapers triggered a heated debate about Carfagna’s candidacy as Minister. A few doubted her political experience, many commented on her ‘sexy’ femininity. Carfagna’s appearance was in fact dissected in a peculiar way: as a former beauty queen, television show girl and a nude model for calendars, the minister was described not merely as attractive, but as a young ‘hot’ politician. An image that became entangled with her political appeal in the eyes of the electorate, the media and other commentators. The erotic sexualisation of Carfagna’s persona was followed by a moralistic sexualisation, on the part of the catholic fringe of the political elite and the public opinion. Here Carfagna’s role as Minister was finally accepted, but not without criticism. This was not so much for her lack of political experience, but for the ‘hot’ image she evoked. This collided with the Catholic public image of women that centers around purity and virginity. As Iris Young wrote, for centuries female power has been always connected to the Christian image of the ‘Madonna’, providing women a unique position with which to identify. This has been achieved at the cost of repressing sexuality:

The Madonna must be a virgin mother (...) In western logic, woman is the seat of such oppositional categorization, for patriarchal logic defines an exclusive border between motherhood and sexuality. The virgin or the whore, the pure or the impure, the nurturer or the seducer is either asexual mother or sexualized beauty, but one precludes the other. (Young 1992: 157)

This Catholic dichotomous discourse of pure and impure has affected Carfagna’s public image as a minister. She was considered ‘impure’ because of her sexy femininity and thus considered not to be suitable for an institutional role. But, how did Mara Carfagna react to such sexist and moral discourses?

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<sup>102</sup> <http://forzaitalia-milano.it/>. Here you can find the explanation of the political objectives of the “Azzurro Donne” movement.

Soon afterwards her nomination as minister of equal opportunities Carfagna was protagonist of what I called a ‘redemptive’ physical process. The image of the voluptuous girl completely disappeared. A skinny body, almost androgynous, has taken the place of the woman with long brown hair and sizeable curves. She lost many kilos (some newspapers announced a possible start of anorexia) and her fashion style reminds one of the soberness of American female politicians such as Hilary Clinton. Indeed she now sports a look that is very sober and elegant.



**Mara Carfagna’s picture while she was still working on TV as showgirl**



**Mara Carfagna during her first public appearances as Minister of Equal**

Might her being skinny now and almost anorexic be a sort of disciplinary action to redeem her past, a bodily reaction to the Italian patriarchal representation of femininity in politics? Relying on Susan Bordo’s writings<sup>103</sup> and her thesis that in contemporary society “through the pursuit of an ever-changing, homogenizing, elusive ideal of femininity [...] female bodies become what Foucault calls ‘docile bodies’”<sup>104</sup>, I posit that Carfagna’s physical transformation should be read as a political question. Her body became a “docile body”: an adaptation to the power

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<sup>103</sup> Susan Bordo, *The body and the reproduction of femininity: a feminist appropriation of Foucault*, in: A.M. Jaggar and S.R Bordo (ed.), *Gender/Body/Knowledge, Feminist Reconstructions of being and Knowing*, New Brunswick/London: Rutgers University Press, 1989, pp.13-31

<sup>104</sup> Ibid. cit. p.14. “Docile bodies” are bodies whose forces and energies are habituated to external regulation, subjectification, transformation, improvement.

discourse of Italian sexist culture and her position as Minister of Equal Opportunities. The physical change is a complex reaction to the Italian Catholic sexist representation of femininity that promotes an eroticization of the female body while at the same time repressing it. Mara Carfagna's experience shows that the dominant discourse represses the erotic female figure when it enters the political sphere. The female body has to simultaneously carry the ambiguous visual imaginary of chasteness and eroticism, of motherhood and careerism.

Moreover, the neoliberal idea of the entrepreneurial subject played also a relevant role in the forming of the Minister's subjectivity. Her body not only represents the embodiment of the Italian sexist culture, it is also the result of the entrepreneurial spirit that right wing female politicians are promoting: "you make yourself, take risks to obtain success". In this controversial juncture between Catholic moralism and neo-liberal dream the Minister becomes the political symbol of women's endeavor to achieve empowerment by using their bodies as political tools within the parameters of the patriarchal and capitalist economy.

Many Italian feminists have extensively criticized the neo-liberal discourse of women's empowerment embodied by the Minister of Equal Opportunities. They defined it as a sort of 'backlash' towards the feminist claims and practices because behind such discourse there is a political agenda that dismisses the gains conquered in many years of feminist struggles.

While the backlash is certainly a component of the political activity<sup>105</sup> of the Minister of Equal Opportunities and Berlusconi's government, such a term oversimplify the complex position that the contemporary female experience occupies with regard to western politics and the media. Moreover, it might bring us to underestimate what Mara Carfagna can represent for her electorate in terms of gender issues.

Mara Carfagna's political activity represents an example of how a young generation of women have been effected by capitalism and neo-liberalism, which encouraged women to concentrate on private lives and consumer capacities as the sites for self-expression and agency. The Minister of Equal Opportunities embodies

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<sup>105</sup> Actually, although Carfagna has promoted media campaigns against sexual discrimination, she rarely publicly condemned the sexist language adopted by the right wing colleagues toward women and LGBTQ groups. Moreover, she legislated a new law that has absolutely worsened sex workers rights. And she debates about women's political protagonism taking a distance from the political practices that feminism had embraced to achieve civil and sexual rights

what many international feminists have called the post feminist female agent. This means that Carfagna's political subjectivity is firmly located in this time of advanced capitalism, where European countries have completely embraced consumerist, middle-class values and aspirations. No matter if we are talking about right wing or centre left wing governments, neo-liberal ideology has triumphed in Europe. Now the centre left has adopted a post-ideological political agenda and has made neoliberalism and entrepreneurialism strong points of their political programs. And this has rebounded on women's life experiences. As Stephanie Genz (2002) and Mc Robbie (2004) wrote, European centre-left parties have been adopting a 'third way philosophy'<sup>106</sup>, whose discourses and practices affected women's agency and policies. The 'third way philosophy' endorses the idea that the most important task of modernization is to invest in human capital: human and economic interests intertwine as they are connected to the concept of efficiency, competition and high performance. The third way actively encourages citizens to exert control over their future by combining their individual ambitions and strengths with the economic interests and goals of the market. Such a new political agenda drove women to deny the sense of collectivity provided by feminist movement and to embrace a 'new individualism', that professes individual responsibility when it comes to personal welfare.

In Italy, in parallel to the advent of Berlusconi's populism and its sexist agenda, the former centre left wing party "Democratici di Sinistra" (today called "Partito Democratico") endorsed such third way politics, in particular during the centre left wing government lead by Romano Prodi and Massimo D'Alema. While right wing populism mobilized its people through virile and sexist discourses and imaginaries produced by media and politics, the centre-left wing mobilized the 'centre' electorate adopting a neo-liberal strategy and dismissing its communitarian commitment to disadvantaged or discriminated groups.

I argue that we should frame the rise of right wing politicians like Mara Carfagna and the increase of sexism in Italian politics, within this broader political context. The mayor left wing parties, adopting the neo-liberal agenda set up by the right, delivered in Berlusconi's hands the rearticulation of concepts and values like freedom, labor and

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<sup>106</sup> See the manifesto "Europe: The third way/Die Neue Mitte" (1999) by Toni Blair and Gerhard Schroeder. This was a political manifesto that proposed the values and programs necessary for a renewal of social democracy, at a time when leftist socialist and communist ideologies no longer wholly apply. In Italy this political agenda has been embraced by the centre left wing leaders Romano Prodi and Massimo D'Alema.

women's emancipation. Concepts that, Carfagna's book 'Stelle a destra' adopted to become the manifesto of this new female post feminist subjectivity.

This book published in the winter of 2008, is a collection of several bibliographies of eight famous female politicians in Europe and in the United States. The women described are role models or "pioneers" (a term that Carfagna uses often in her text) of a successful career in the masculine political elite. In the introduction Carfagna describes these politicians as conservative and liberal women who possess a set of different characteristics: tenacity, coherence, political passion and obstinacy. The author explains that the aim to narrate the story of these stars is to break the taboo that female political participation can be something other than a phenomenon of the left. This prejudice, she goes on to state, is due to the monopolization of the women emancipation struggle by left wing Italian feminists since 68' who, according to Carfagna, did not obtain much results due to the ideological nature of the struggle. Instead, the political involvement of right wing women has always been very pragmatic, "*poco fumo e molto arrosto*"<sup>107</sup> (literally "Little smoke and much roast", no words but action). According to Carfagna, "these are women that did not take to the streets in procession with their hands to form a triangle, ranting against the male murderers."<sup>108</sup>

This critique towards 68 feminism follows Carfagna's aim to profile the experience of these eight right wing politicians as separated, unique and special within women's emancipation. She tries to set forth a specific right wing female identity that enables new and affirmative conceptions of the self, to articulate collective identities. She revalues characteristics such as emotionality and social connectedness which women are thought to embody. "Who said that the management of power is only cynicism or stuff for cold blooded creatures? Politics needs women and their different way of interpreting public engagement. Their contribution of honesty, dedication and affect. [...] There are many cases, and various matters, in which the sensitivity, patience, female mental flexibility or the compassion of a mother can be decisive"<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Mara Carfagna, *Stelle a destra*, Aliberti Editore, 2008, cit. p. 11

<sup>108</sup> "Sono donne che non sono scese in piazza, in corteo con le mani a formare un triangolo, sbraitando contro il maschio assassino" Ibid cit. p. 12

<sup>109</sup> "Chi la detto che la gestione del potere sia soltanto cinismo o roba per animali a sangue freddo? La politica ha bisogno delle donne e del loro modo differente di interpretare l'impegno pubblico. Il loro contributo di onesta, di dedizione, di cuore. [...] sono tanti i casi, e varie le materie, in cui la sensibilita, la pazienza, l'elasticita mentale femminili o la compassione di una madre possono essere risolutive." Ibid. cit. p. 12



In Carfagna's sentences we can unveil a sort of a paradoxical shift in women's agency, what Mc Robbie suggest to explore through what she describes as 'double entanglement' of post feminism, referring to the situation where gains of the feminist movement become widely accepted as the new commons sense, but feminism as such is fiercely contested. Carfagna's discourse encompasses the co-existence of certain feminist narratives that celebrated essential female qualities, such as sensibility and female flexibility. In the meantime she also fiercely repudiates feminist political practices and claims (women who took to the streets in procession with their hands to form a triangle).

Such a 'double entanglement' approach might be used to analyze the book and grasp the aim of its author. In the eight biographies, the minister highlights that such new right wave of female politicians have brought forward the idea that every woman can be successful in politics, if only she has an entrepreneurial and managerial spirit. She thus completely dismisses the power relations which define the field of sexuality.

The biography of Rashida Dati introduces also a racial question to the discussion of post feminist subjectivity. Carfagna presents R. Dati, the former French Minister of Justice of the Sarkozy government (2007-2009), as a political fighter because she is able to struggle for her political career while being aware of the difficulties and prejudices of her being a second-generation female immigrant. Carfagna underlines in her text that Dati's professional career is a positive example to admire and copy for the immigrants living in the banlieue. "She 's the symbol of successful integration. The second generation French are not only those living in the banlieues. Dati, the daughter of North African immigrants, is the proof that with commitment and dedication, every result is within reach."<sup>110</sup>

These sentences represent the voice on immigrants of the Italian minister. The concept of "whiteness"<sup>111</sup> helps to understand this racialized position. Carfagna uses the discourse of 'whiteness' to transform the experience of a second generation female immigrant in a successful result of French integration. Dati becomes the symbol of

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<sup>110</sup> "Lei e' il simbolo dell'integrazione di successo. I francesi di seconda generazione non sono solo quelli della banlieue. La Dati, figlia di immigrati maghrebini, e' la dimostrazione che, con l'impegno e la dedizione, ogni risultato e' a portata di mano." Ibid. cit. p.15

<sup>111</sup> As Gabriel Griffin and Rosi Braidotti explain in 'Whiteness and European Situatedness': "for whiteness is not just about the relation between black and white but about the definition of white as such (...). There are black and white scenarios where color is key but in many instances of discrimination and oppression color is not the only determining factor" (Braidotti and Griffin 2002: 227)

French nationalism where the assimilation of the nationalist values can redeem her position as an immigrant. She becomes the populist symbol of the egalitarian values of Justice in France. The racialized narrative of Carfagna attributes a symbolic role to Dati putting her in the position that marks the boundaries between the good and the bad immigrants. The good immigrant does not question existing power relations and the disadvantaged role given to immigrants, but accepts them and tries to find a path within its constraints.

This representation of Dati applies the same ideological mechanism seen already in the Lega Nord and Switzerland SVP party in the last chapter. Representations of western successful and ‘emancipated’ women are used as symbolic signifiers of ‘white’, European superiority versus the ‘other’, the migrant subject. In ‘Stelle a destra’ thus the language of women’s emancipation play pivotal roles in discourses and policies redefining Italian democracy and its neo-conservative and xenophobic agenda <sup>112</sup>.

It also represents a manifesto for a new postfeminist subject. Individualism, entrepreneurialism and freedom become key-concepts of the postfeminist celebration of the personal struggles (like that one of Dati) and triumphs of women. Furthermore, they hide, as we have seen in Carfagna’s case, the power relations which work so effectively at the level of embodiment.

## **Conclusions**

In this chapter I have analyzed the debate on widespread sexism in Italian media and politics. In particular, how Italian feminist thinkers have questioned the sexualization of mainstream culture and the connection between sex, money and power that lies at the base of Berlusconi’s populism. The debates around the idea of ‘women’s silence’, ‘post-patriarchy’ and that of the un-televized ‘real women’

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<sup>112</sup> This is a trend that is visible not only in Italy. Certain articulations of feminism and lesbian/gay liberation have now become intimately entwined with the reinforcement of ethnocultural boundaries within European countries. ‘Europe’ itself is being re-imagined in terms of sexual democracy and gender equality. In several northern European countries the Islamophobic populist right appropriate elements of the feminist and sexual liberation agenda to reinforce anti-immigrant policies and the refashioning of citizenship through the discourse of western secular liberalism as cultural whiteness. In Italy though, the discourse of secular liberalism is rarely deployed. A fundamentalist Catholicism advocated by the Vatican still explicitly exerts control over Italian politics and the definition and respect of sexual and civil rights.

oversimplify the complexity of women's agency in Italian populism. These analyses, while dealing with the sexist commodification of female bodies, don't consider the context of the neo-liberal economy and the neo-conservative agenda that have deeply challenged feminist discourses of emancipation of women.

The concept of 'post-feminism' provides a valid alternative to analyze the Italian context. 'Post-feminism' is able to capture the complexity of the politics of the Berlusconi governments, which constitute a 'backlash' against the feminist gains of the 1970s and 1980s. Through the example of the political career of the Minister of Equal Opportunities Mara Carfagna, we highlight the necessity to look at the ambiguity of women's agency in times of neo-liberalism and neo-conservative policies in Italian populism. The precarization of Italian labour market, the commodification of women's bodies in consumer culture and the neo-liberal economy, the standardization of femininities promoted by Italian media and politics and fundamentalist Catholicism have deeply affected the process of female identification. Furthermore, right wing populism has developed hand in hand with a depolitization of the left and the supremacy of neo-liberal ideology. This has determined the abandonment of the left communitarian commitment to disadvantaged or discriminated groups or to feminist 'sisterhood'.

Feminist thinkers and activists should consider discourses of individualism, entrepreneurialism and freedom, the key-concepts of the postfeminist celebration of the personal struggles and triumphs of women, as expressions of power relations which, as we have seen in Carfagna's case, work so effectively at the level of embodiment.

## ***Conclusions***

In relying on Laclau's definition of populism, this research explains the success of Italian populism as linked to their capacity of voicing a clear political antagonism, which activates a process of collective identification through political discourse, emotions and symbolism. Populism's symbolic politics in fact revolves around the appropriation and politicization of cultural symbols. As long as the people recognize themselves in the symbols, images, languages that populism proposes to them, then the possibility that they will embrace the corresponding ideological view becomes greater.

Silvio Berlusconi and Umberto Bossi revived and refashioned the political antagonism that has always characterized Italy from the 1945 on, based on the ideological opposition of 'Democrazia Christiana' and 'Partito Comunista'. They bound together and gave form to a political discourse that can recruit a wide electorate with different political demands. Those who were searching a new political identity and those who felt anger and discomfort due to the institutional political crisis followed after the 'Tangentopoli' scandals.

*Lega Nord* and *Popolo della liberta'* have been able to storm the political stage and enlist popular imaginations in order to fight their political adversaries.

The main point of this research is to highlight that the political force of such populist narratives has been built up through the exploitation of gender roles, patterns and identities already existing in Italian history and political culture. Bossi and Berlusconi interpellated their electorate through representations of masculinity based on virility, sexual potency, heterosexuality and physical potency, inherited from Fascism and the Catholic Church. Female representations too have been exploited to manufacture political consent: women as mother of the nation or national object of male desire or signifiers of racism.

Through television and political propaganda, Berlusconi's media spectacle of virility affects Italian society. Female spectators are continuously interpellated by models of femininities extremely eroticized, or subjected to the process of pornification. In turn, men are positioned as compulsory heterosexuals, objectified by their own gazing at women.

Right wing populism thus creates and exploits this everyday imaginary that Italians are confronted with to consolidate its sexist and xenophobic politics.

Italian feminist thinkers have questioned this sexualization of mainstream culture and the connection between sex, money and power that lies at the base of Berlusconi's populism. Yet, the debates around the idea of 'women's silence', 'post-patriarchy' and that of the un-televized 'real women' oversimplify the complexity of women's agency in Italian populism. The precarization of Italian labour market, the commodification of women's bodies in consumer culture and the neo-liberal economy, the standardization of femininities promoted by Italian media and politics and fundamentalist Catholicism affect the process of female identification.

I propose then different strategies to fight the 'backlash' of Berlusconi's sexist populism: first of all, the feminist thinkers and activist should unveil the right wing populist discourses of freedom, individualism and entrepreneurialism as expressions of power relations which, as we have seen in Carfagna's case, affect women in particular and contradictory ways.

Second, the left should re-invent its political identity with the same antagonistic character presented by the right. In Italy the success of the right wing coalition has been possible also due to the fact the left wing political programme became more similar to that of the centre right. The emphasis I am putting on the relevance of the us/them opposition in the construction of political identities doesn't want to present populism as the only possible logic to pursue to come to terms with the 'political'. The negative aspect of populism is to see the 'political' as a us/them opposition constructed in a moral register: "*In place of a struggle between 'right and left' we are faced with a struggle between 'right and wrong'*" (Mouffe 2005, p.5). Democratic politics should have a partisan character where the us/them positions do not become a friend/enemy distinction, but a struggle between adversaries that have a common respect for the basic principles of representative democracy.

In underlining the partisan character of the political, there is a call of resisting the analysis of several liberal theorists who have envisioned politics 'beyond the left and the right' (Giddens 1995). The 'Post-political' visions, which claim the disappearance of potential antagonism in contemporary politics, do not help to understand the real stake of populism in Europe today. Right wing populism has been able to invest in the 'passions of identification' (Stravrakakis 2005) through discourse and enjoyment that are important aspects of the formation of collective identities.

Feminist movements are also involved this mission: the feminist struggles should be capable of inventing contrasting forms of political identifications that resist the normalization of race, sex and class identity that right wing populism is so efficiently pushing forward.

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