

From Parliament to Virtual Piazza? Opposition in Italy in the Age of Berlusconi

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the state of the radical opposition to Berlusconi's fourth government in recent months. It argues that the left should firstly regroup itself in light of Berlusconi's continuing dominance of Italian political life, by learning from its previous experiences in opposition between 2001 and 2006, and then work towards the definition of an overarching project and narrative able to clarify what alternative vision it has to offer the Italian electorate. Indeed, despite the modest impact of the opposition at the beginning of the century, new means of organising protest and communicating with the public that relied on the Internet and mobile technologies were developed and proved significant in keeping opposition alive. This paper argues that a renewed convergence of plans and objectives among the various political actors that aim to offer an alternative to Berlusconi is necessary and that new technologies have an important role to play in facilitating this process.

Keywords: Berlusconi, Opposition, Radical left, New media

Introduction

Since the end of World War Two Italy has been a laboratory for revolutionary thinking, with Marxist and neo-fascist radical cultures targeting the capitalist, liberal-democratic, consumerist system that was established in the country following the fall of Fascism. Despite the radical left and the neo-fascist right being marginalised politically and normally excluded from government, revolutionary values continued to remain embedded in Italian society and greatly contributed to fuelling the social upheavals of 1968 and 1977. Indeed, communist forces and, later those of the 'new left', enjoyed uninterrupted representation in Parliament until 2008 and – in the case of the Italian Communist Party (Partito Comunista Italiano, PCI) and its more moderate offshoot, the Democratic Party of the Left (Partito Democratico della Sinistra, PDS) later the Left Democrats (Democratici di Sinistra, DS) – held significant positions of power at the local and regional levels for decades, particularly in the 'red' regions of central Italy. The electoral strength of the PCI; the fact that it was well rooted at the local level in parts of Italy; the links it had with the largest

trade-union confederation, the Italian General Confederation of Labour (Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro, CGIL): all this gave the values and culture of the leftist opposition considerable weight and influence. For some, the left was, despite its marginalisation in political terms, no less than culturally hegemonic in Italy during the Cold War.

Since the general election of 2008 and the unexpected exclusion of many left-wing forces from Parliament (see Newell, 2009), radical leftist parties in particular have effectively been silenced, and right-wing perspectives (grounded on the three pillars of populism, economic neo-liberalism and extreme, Vatican-inspired social conservatism), seem to be truly hegemonic. Radical activists now urgently need to ask themselves not only what model of society they want, but crucially how they are going to communicate it to the electorate and make themselves heard in a country where the right enjoys a very obvious advantage, as far as access to the media is concerned.

This paper argues that the left should firstly regroup itself in light of Berlusconi's continuing dominance of Italian political life, and then work towards the definition of an overarching project and narrative able to clarify what alternative vision the opposition has to offer. We begin by summarising the 'state of play' in Italian politics following the election of April 2008, before moving back in time briefly to consider the significance of the parliamentary left, the so-called 'civil society' and cultural/media practitioners that opposed the right during the years of Berlusconi's second and third governments (from 2001 to 2006). We then return to the present to explore Berlusconi's fourth government in the light of what we can learn from the earlier period. As we will argue below, despite the modest impact of the opposition during the 2001-2006 period, new means of organising protest and communicating with the public that relied on the Internet and mobile technologies proved significant in keeping opposition alive. This was mainly due to the opportunities they offered for circumventing exclusion from the traditional media (especially television) that those opposing the right have been experiencing in recent years. As we will see, crucial to the visibility, and therefore impact, of oppositional players in this period were the transformations in the kinds of distribution network available to political groups, social movements and cultural practitioners, and, importantly, their ability to use the available networks creatively, extending and adapting them. Our concluding section will ask where the left is now, what can be learned from past experiences and what can be done to overcome the apparent crisis in which the opposition finds itself. We will argue that a renewed convergence of plans and objectives among the various political actors that aim at offering an alternative to Berlusconi is necessary, if not *with* the new-born Democratic Party (Partito Democratico, PD), at least on the left of it.

The 2008 general election

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

The reasons for this historic defeat are varied. According to some, the moderate left must carry some of the blame for not seeking an electoral alliance with the parties on its left, 'using' an election that Berlusconi was expected to win anyway to obliterate such parties (Mastropaolo, 2009). A factor that also played an important role was the unpopularity of Romano Prodi's 2006-2008 government (Tuorto, 2008), which the left had backed in order to keep Berlusconi out of power. However, these explanations alone do not fully account for the scale of this defeat, with the PD losing the elections (as was expected) and the parties of the radical left haemorrhaging about 70 per cent of their votes (in part to the PD itself and in part to abstention) (ITANES, 2008). Clearly the radical left alliance, the Rainbow Left (La Sinistra-l'Arcobaleno, SA) looked too much like a patchwork of different colours, while failing to project a clear image and identity as an innovative force for change. In focusing on resisting Berlusconi's resurgent influence, it failed to put forward a positive message about its own ability to govern in the future, making no real attempt to provide a synthesis of the very distinctive socialist, green and communist cultures that it encompassed. Admittedly, the lack of time available did not help: elections were held only a few months after Prodi was forced to resign, giving little time for organisation. Nonetheless, simply bringing together yet another motley-crew of 'resistors', did not wash with left-wing voters.

The situation in which the opposition now finds itself has severe repercussions for the quality of Italian democracy, since there is a not insignificant section of the population that opposes the values of

'Berlusconismo' and that holds views on social justice, equality, sustainable development and international co-operation that they do not find represented in Parliament at present, given the centrist and moderate strategy still pursued by the PD. Visibility is also a problem for the opposition on the left of the PD, since only parliamentary forces are consistently given space in the media, at least by the public service broadcaster, Radiotelevisione Italiana (RAI). This is particularly worrying given the right's control over information through Prime Minister Berlusconi's large media empire.² It is therefore not surprising if the right-wing values that Berlusconi embodies – he is a fan of Margaret Thatcher, was unashamedly pro-Bush and is instrumentally pro-Vatican – seem set to remain hegemonic in the country, especially given his still high popularity ratings. Although it would be overly simplistic to argue that Berlusconi's media power is the only ingredient of his success, there is little doubt that he has made good use of the opportunities afforded to him by his media (especially television) to set the agenda of public debate and gain positive coverage for the initiatives of his governments.

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

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

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, radical parties kept up a vociferous parliamentary opposition to the centre-right government's initiatives. For instance, Communist Refoundation (Rifondazione Comunista, RC) worked at strengthening its ties with social movements and minority groups as they struggled for civil rights (as testified by the number of high-profile 'alter-globalisation' and openly gay/transgender politicians that the party managed to elect to the national Parliament and regional administrations). Ultimately, however, opposition from within the

institutional left, including its radical elements, remained divided, and scored few victories. Indeed, the left failed to respond adequately to issues as diverse as Berlusconi's alleged *ad personam* legislation (the creation of laws to benefit himself and his associates), the violent repression of the G8 demonstrations in Genoa in 2001, and the Government's restrictive legislation on immigration. The impact of leftist struggles on the lives of minorities and marginalised groups in society was also modest, with LGBT communities, for instance, continuing to experience severe discrimination both socially and in the workplace, and women continuing to receive much lower pay and have less job security than men (Altieri et al., 2006; *Conquiste del Lavoro*, 8 March 2008).

The perceived ineffectiveness of institutional opposition, however, coupled with awareness of the threat that Berlusconi posed both politically and culturally, encouraged a strong grass-roots response which, we believe, could still provide the opposition with some inspiration today. At the beginning of the new millennium, protest in the streets and piazzas increased sharply and new ways of re-claiming outdoor space sprang up. Besides the active and popular 'alter-globalisation' and anti-war movements that emerged in response to the G8 summit at Genova in 2001 and the invasion of Iraq in 2003 respectively, Italy also witnessed the largest demonstration the CGIL had ever organised. In March 2001, between two and three million protestors stood against the Government's attempted removal of the right of employees not to be dismissed 'without just cause' (a proposal that Berlusconi was eventually forced to drop). Opposition was not confined to the radical and unionised left, however. An interesting development in this period was that of the 'reflexive middle classes', who also found new ways of mobilising and raising their voices. Concerned citizens started organising street events (the *Girotondi* demonstrations), holding hands around public buildings such as the law courts in Milan in order to 'protect them' from the verbal and legislative attacks of a Prime Minister who was repeatedly investigated for his past business dealings.

What most distinguished the opposition in this period from anything that had happened before, however, was not so much what was going on in real space, but what was going on simultaneously in virtual space. Fuelled by the spread of new technologies, de-territorialised radical oppositional spaces were created which both supplemented and galvanised interest in real-space activist initiatives. Crucial to the visibility, and therefore impact, of oppositional players in this period were the transformations in the kinds of distribution network available and practitioners' ability to use the available networks creatively, extending and adapting them. Whereas in 2001 television was still the most important medium for distributing political messages and the Internet was having little impact, by 2006 the picture had changed, as Internet usage reached

more than 35 percent of the population (albeit normally the better off and better educated). The Internet, a growing medium for distribution, provided a new home for high-profile oppositional satirists and comedians who had been removed by Berlusconi from television (or had always been seen as too radical to be hosted by this medium). The most obvious example is that of the popular comedian, Beppe Grillo, who launched a weblog in 2005 that has now gained unprecedented popularity and plays a role similar to that of Michael Moore in America, as it exploits comedy to address serious political issues, mobilise sympathisers and launch campaigns (Vaccari, 2009).

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

In addition to the use of virtual space, further strategies of resistance were developed in this period, specifically associations *within* movements or communities, and *between* movements (or between movements and political parties). The shifting constituencies of the new social movements render collaboration, and the associations it produces, productively flexible; but, crucially, it also renders them vulnerable to fragmentation (Melucci, 1996: 115-16). Effective association within movements and among cultural practitioners relies on an ability to 'compromise', while the very multiplicity of perspectives and causes embodied by the radically variegated and constantly evolving constituencies of new social movements and cultural texts may render this difficult. Several attempts at activist collaboration have struggled with such challenges: the 'No Global' movement, which had enjoyed strong public support and visibility in the wake of the events of Genoa in 2001, subsequently dissolved due to its evolving focus (from fighting neo-liberalism to opposing the war in Iraq). Relationships between the *Girotondi* movement, the CGIL and the

institutional left have always been tense. Moreover, feeling delegitimised by its inability to mount effective opposition to Berlusconi, the institutional left always seemed suspicious of realities that it could not control.

In some cases, the movements have, for a variety of reasons, attempted to manage their own political representation, rather than align themselves with one 'side' or another. For example, the LGBT movement has sought ever more autonomy from political parties (despite seeking the election of candidates through the lists fielded by RC and others). This has been due in part to disappointment with the opposition offered by the left between 2001 and 2006 and to recognition that the movement must continue to lobby and attempt to work with whichever party is in power (Ross, 2009). In part it has been due to the mistrust felt by some (especially the feminist communities) of support offered by the state, since this risks annexing their objectives to those of the current government (Della Porta, 2003). In part it has been due to the effect of affiliation between associations and political parties (such as between immigrant activist associations and the left) in promoting a struggle between competing agendas, which risked blunting the edge of potentially powerful demonstrations or campaigns through in-fighting (Pojmann, 2009).

From Berlusconi to Berlusconi: What is Left of the Left in 2009?

The absence of an effective opposition to Berlusconi, much debated during the years from 2001 to 2006, affects the quality of Italian democracy today even more seriously than it did before, as we observed earlier. During the first few months of the new 'Berlusconi era', the largest party of opposition, the PD, has appeared unsure about whether it should attack the Prime Minister or instead tone down its criticism in order to win support from so-called 'moderates'. At one point it even considered coming to an agreement with the right on constitutional reform. The party is now in a limbo following the resignation of its secretary Walter Veltroni in February 2009.

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

of a 'regime' that has been put in place by Berlusconi. IdV's approach was expected to help the party attract the votes of former supporters of the radical left in the 2009 European elections. However, politically IdV is centrist and its views on issues such as sustainable development, the rights of workers and civil liberties are only mildly progressive (certainly not 'radical'). In short, IdV cannot be the party to give voice to radical leftist critiques of the neoliberal, unequal and fiercely pro-capitalist model of development that Berlusconi has always promoted and defended, and of the neo-conservative values he has come to embody. So, what is left of radical leftist critiques of the right in Italy today, following the heavy electoral defeat of only a few months ago?

It is clearly very difficult to provide a picture of what has been happening since the 2008 election. Events which seem significant now may prove in a few months or years to be far less so and the impact of such events is hard to judge without seeing them in a longer timeframe. However, what we can say is that when Berlusconi returned to power in 2008, social movements, radical intellectuals and artists were slow to respond. Nonetheless, two developments this year, the re-emergence of the students' movement in autumn 2008 and opposition to the actions of the Government during the final weeks of the 'Englaro affair', have been significant. These have created widespread debate in the national media and given new impetus to criticism of the Berlusconi government. Importantly, both have to do with fundamental values that the radical left should be able to re-think and defend – as there is a significant part of the electorate that clearly cares about them: the need for Italy to reverse the tide of underinvestment in its education system (which generally only reaches excellence in primary education), giving true opportunities to all, and the separation of Church and State (a principle that the moderate left cannot consistently defend, given the prominence that former Christian Democrats have within the PD).

The wave of protests that arose in the autumn against the changes to primary, secondary and university education known as the 'Gelmini reform' (after the name of the minister who had proposed it), spurred a wave of comments about a new alliance having been forged among students, parents and teachers, surmounting generational and professional boundaries (*la Repubblica*, 15 October 2008). According to its critics, this reform was nothing more than a cynical cost-cutting exercise of about €700 million (achieved mainly by reducing the staff working in the education sector). The reform was opposed throughout the autumn by a vocal movement backed by the three major national union confederations, the Italian General Confederation of Labour (Confederazione generale italiana del lavoro, CGIL), the Italian Confederation of Workers' Trade Unions (Confederazione Italiana Sindacati dei Lavoratori, CISL) and Italian Workers' Union (Unione Italiana del Lavoro, UIL), as well as the 'Rank-

and-File Committees' (Comitati di base, Cobas). Throughout October and November 2008 demonstrations were staged throughout the country, most of which were peaceful. According to the Cobas, the demonstrations organised by them and held on 17 October attracted 500,000 people, while the demonstration of 31 October organised by CGIL, CISL and UIL attracted no less than one million people (*la Repubblica*, 31 October 2008). Various initiatives such as the occupation of universities throughout Italy and the organisation of lectures held 'in the open' remained widespread throughout the autumn. Despite the Government agreeing to revisit some limited aspects of the reform following the considerable upheaval witnessed in October and November (*la Repubblica*, 7 November 2008), the bulk of it (and especially the considerable cuts that came with it) was left untouched. With the dying down of the student movement in recent months, the impression is that we are witnessing a repeat of 2002, when students took to the street to oppose yet another reform of the education system (the Moratti reform) that was duly approved by Parliament regardless of the opposition (and was only abolished by the left later on, after its electoral victory in 2006).

Another focus of opposition to the Berlusconi government has been the events surrounding the death of Eluana Englaro. On 13 November 2008, the Court of Cassation confirmed a previous ruling on the part of Milan's Court of Appeal that would allow the suspension of feeding and hydration for the woman, who had been in a coma since a road accident in 1992. However, despite the fact that the highest courts in Italy and Europe supported suspending nutrition, Berlusconi, with strong backing from the Vatican (which was outraged by the rulings), attempted to get an emergency decree law passed which would reverse the rulings and 'save' Eluana, by forcing those caring for patients in a state like Eluana's not to suspend forced feeding. Critics of Berlusconi's move saw it as a cynical and deliberate attempt to undermine the constitutional pillars of democratic society – specifically the crucial notion of the separation of state powers – and reaffirm his personal authority. Indeed, Berlusconi's initiative led to an unprecedented head-on battle with the highest authority of the state, the President Giorgio Napolitano, who refused to sign the decree. The case is significant because it shows how closely Church and Government can still be aligned, and because it is apparent that Berlusconi was using the Englaro case to reaffirm his authority vis-à-vis the President, as the leader of the coalition that had won the elections, and therefore, as he argued at the time, the one who should have been allowed effectively to 'govern' without interference.

Interestingly, the Englaro case also tested the power of the opposition: sit-ins in piazzas were organised; demonstrations and large groups were formed in support of Napolitano and Englaro's father (who advocated the suspension of nutrition in his daughter's best interests), both in 'real' space,

and in the virtual spaces of social networking sites such as Facebook; protest messages circulated via text and email. The protest continued unabated after Englaro's death and on 12 February the PD organised a demonstration in defence of the Constitution, also attended by IdV. On 22 February, *Micromega* organised a demonstration in Piazza Farnese in Rome, responding to the calls of intellectuals such as Paolo Flores d'Arcais (who edits the journal), Andrea Camilleri, Furio Colombo, Pancho Pardi, and Stefano Rodotà. A few days later D'Arcais, along with Camilleri, Umberto Veronese and Rodotà wrote an open letter to *la Repubblica* attacking both a law proposed by the right on the matter and the PD's proposed amendments to it. However, although the case demonstrates how rapidly and successfully demonstrations can be organised through virtual (and real) networks, ultimately the opposition – in both the piazza and in virtual online space – failed to make a significant enough impact. On 27 February, after much debate inside and outside Parliament, a law was passed which made it illegal to suspend hydration and nutrition to patients, including those who may have stated unequivocally their desire not to receive such treatment in certain circumstances (such as finding themselves in a permanent and irreversible coma).

As can be seen from these brief accounts of recent activism, the 'piazza' continues to be a key focus for political struggles in a country where the word is used as a synonym for popular protest. However, increasingly real space is interacting with virtual space; and the new media are central to the dissemination of oppositional messages. The organisation of protests now takes place on the web; video recordings of events are disseminated through YouTube, and through the online papers and websites of protest groups; discussions of various initiatives take place before, during and after the event in dedicated weblogs. Facebook, while not yet a key player during the second and third Berlusconi governments, has since suddenly exploded, allowing those opposed to the entrepreneur and the policies of his fourth government to meet virtually and to organise. During the student protest, groups like 'Internate la Gelmini' (Intern Gelmini), 'Scommetto che almeno cinque milioni di persone odiano la Gelmini' (I bet that at least five million people hate Gelmini) and 'A favore dell'istruzione e della ricerca: No alla legge 133' (Defend education and research: Say no to Law 133) were born, with the latter already boasting 80,000 members by the end of October 2008 (*la Repubblica*, 24 October 2008). Even sabotage has sometimes been virtual, as seen in the blacking out of the Finance Minister Giulio Tremonti's home page by a slogan on the part of left-wing students on 2 November 2008. Since Berlusconi's return to power in 2008, therefore, protest has made itself visible in the new media of communication – especially the Internet – but these have been *in alliance with*, not *at the expense of* the 'good old piazza', which is still seen as an important site of resistance and a place in which to build consensus.

Political satire on television, blocked by Berlusconi between 2001 and 2006, also appears to have made a return in 2008, with numerous shows poking fun at politicians, especially ones from the Berlusconi camp. The famous comedian Sabina Guzzanti, removed from television during the 2001-2006 period of Berlusconi's government, has returned, appearing repeatedly on *Annozero*, a programme hosted by Michele Santoro, a journalist who had also been 'ostracised' from state television under a previous Berlusconi government. Guzzanti is joined on the networks by her sister Caterina, and by comedians Paola Cortellesi, Gabriella Germani and others, all of whom make fun of Berlusconi or members of his government. The return of satire to television – the main medium through which the majority of the population gathers political intelligence in a country where the circulation of newspapers is comparatively low – alongside the rapid growth of Internet protest, are significant developments. It remains to be seen whether artists whose messages take longer to prepare (playwrights, writers, filmmakers) will become involved again in attacking Berlusconi as they did – even if on a small scale – in the period from 2001 to 2006.

Conclusion

Voices of opposition clearly exist in Italy, although they have not always been effective in opposing Berlusconi's governments. One of the most obvious limitations of the many oppositional movements and initiatives that have sprung up during the 'Berlusconi years', is that they have often lasted only for a season or two. What is still lacking today is an overarching project which is alternative to Berlusconi's governments and values; one that can challenge his agenda of restricting workers' rights, weakening the Constitution and instrumentally promoting social conservatism while keeping a strong hold on the country's communication system. Importantly, the Government's policies are opposed by large strata of the population, a much larger constituency of voters than those who supported the radical left at the last election. These people cannot find representation from IdV for the reasons outlined above, despite possibly siding with it for tactical reasons on some occasions (e.g. in the 2009 European elections).

Alliances are constantly being forged in the context of the fluid communities of the new social movements, especially given the added dimension of virtual mobilisation. However, in order to present a viable alternative to the right, radical forces cannot simply go on being the 'sum' of attempts at collaboration between cultures that remain all too jealous of their distinctiveness. They need to open up and be able to enter into dialogue with social movements and civil society – of which they have sometimes been suspicious. The necessary sensibility and attention to individuals and to the needs of specific groups must be subsumed under the umbrella of collaborative activism; the opposition must benefit, once

again, from a renewed convergence of plans and objectives, as well as exploiting the opportunities offered by the new media. Indeed, the pluralisation of media through which radical leftist views are articulated, reveals a significant degree of resilience among cultural practitioners and activist groups in the face of Berlusconi's hold over the mainstream media in Italy. Similarly, the multiplicity of identity positions promoted within new social movements signifies a fierce resistance to the homogenisation of the subject. Yet this plurality of purpose must remain an enriching quality – while in Italy it has turned too often into a limiting factor. Equally the return to 'purely communist' identities and platforms, that seems to have taken hold of many on the left since the defeat of the Rainbow Alliance in 2008, or the temptation to divide the left even further, must be resisted. The radical left paid a high price in 2008 for the unpopularity of the Prodi government (an issue that will not present itself again at the next general election); and its sudden collapse in January 2008 forced all political actors to improvise an electoral strategy – leading to interesting and unexpected developments in the creation of electoral alliances (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2009).

It is possible (even likely) that the left will now have some years at its disposal to regroup before the next general election. In light of the deep crisis that has shaken the PD, and in light of the PD's apparent inability to attract support from centrist voters (despite its attempts to flirt with them), the radical left must use this time to create a plural and multiple (but united) front of the opposition, one characterised by its own distinctive political project. It might ultimately be the only way to stem what, given Berlusconi's personal approval ratings, still very much looks like a rising tide.

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¹ We are very grateful to The British Academy for the financial support provided to our project of research: 'Resisting the Tide: Cultures of Opposition during the Berlusconi Years' (Continuum, 2009), from which we have drawn material for this article (award number: LGR-45471). An earlier version of this paper appears on the Space of Democracy website edited by Jonathan Pugh (<http://www.spaceofdemocracy.org>).

² In its 2009 report on press freedom around the world, the independent organisation Freedom House downgraded Italy from 'free' to 'partly free' due in part to the unresolved conflict of interests of Silvio Berlusconi and to his continuing attempts to silence those journalists who criticise him by filing law suits against them.