

# DEFINITIONS OF THE SELF, THE CITIZEN AND THE STATE IN CONTEMPORARY ITALY: RHETORICAL AMBIGUITY, METONYMIC SHIFTS AND THE SEXUALIZATION OF THE SOCIAL BODY

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I confirm what I have said, that there is a common opinion in the party, that there really is a closure to the right, that is, we do not believe that a left-right opposition, which would be fatal to our country and in which the DC would be unnaturally on the right and which would disrupt the equilibrium of Italian political life, is useful, not so much for the fortunes of our party, but useful to Christian Democracy (...). Thus, in these circumstances, excluding this formula and the parties' decisions remaining unchanged, the theme (of the congress) is precisely the one which I have indicated, that is, the formula to which I do not see there is any concrete and stable political alternative.

Aldo Moro, November 1961, television interview.

If you have not understood the above, do not be alarmed. You have entered the Twilight Zone of Italian politics, the rhetorical dimension of ambiguity and of metonymic shifts that lead to political mythification in the Barthesian sense.<sup>1</sup> In this paper I will explore some aspects of the rhetorics of

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1. "Il faut ici rappeler que les matières de la parole mythique (langue proprement dite, photographie, peinture, affiche, rite, objet, etc.), pour différentes qu'elles soient audépart, et dès lors qu'elles sont saisies par le mythe, se ramènent à une pure fonction signifiante: le mythe ne voit en elles qu'une même matière première leur unité, c'est qu'elles sont réduites toutes au simple statut de langage. Qu'il s'agisse de graphie littérale ou de graphie picturale, le mythe ne veut voir là qu'un total de signes, qu'un signe global, le terme final d'une première chaîne sémiologique. Et c'est précisément ce terme final qui va devenir premier terme ou terme partiel du système agrandi qu'il édifie. Tout se passe comme si le mythe décalait d'un cran le système formel des premières significations" (Barthes, 1957: 199).

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citizenship and of individual rights in the Italian context, arguing that State threats to individual rights do not emerge as a reaction to demands for political and moral legitimacy by ethnic minorities (the “progressive” position, as is sometimes asserted in the literature), nor as a repressive attempt to deal with the contamination of political spaces by persistent “cultural” traditions such as family, patronage, clientelism, corruption, etc. (the “regressive” position). Instead, I argue that the core problem in reconciling definitions of citizenship and definitions of the self is the inability of the Italian State to localise and give meaningful content to definitions of the citizen, especially through its use of a particular rhetoric stressing personalised values such as duty and honour. In an attempt to reconcile the citizen and the individual, the State has appropriated the rhetorical forms of Catholic morality, transforming the notion of citizenship into a ritual linguistic space in which rights fail to be defined because the space is devoid of semiotic referents to local identities.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, citizens appropriate one of the State’s strongest metaphors, the notion of society as a social body, and give it new meaning, *la Patria*, in order to express their sense of distance and dissatisfaction, as well as to personalise the otherwise sterile notion of citizenship.

In Italy, the dominant view of politics is that it is something corrupt and corrupting, creating a huge gulf between what is viewed as the pure, intimate, private and genuine self and the dirty, public, masked and false self of citizenship. All social classes feel that the central government is failing and has failed since 1948 to provide citizens with any means of effective, institutionalised political participation. In other words, most Italian citizens see themselves as disempowered vis-à-vis the State, and I would like here to raise a few issues about the metaphorical basis of political rhetoric that surrounds this situation. In particular, I would like to address the issue of why Italian political rhetoric is singularly unpersuasive in its repeated appeals to individualised values such as honour and duty; that is, when it is not sending oblique messages about the rules of the political game. I would caution that these are superficial and preliminary comments because of the complexity of the subject and the difficulty in escaping ideologically-sanctioned analyses that are in fact little more than built-in programmatic

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2. I cannot in this limited space detail the complex relationship between the Vatican and the Italian State (and its antecedent statelets), but I would in fact argue that the relationship of state and Vatican rhetoric is more akin to a vicious circle than a simple act of appropriation.

critiques that are part of most Western political ideologies. I would also caution that in English I am unable to provide more than a general overview of some characteristics of Italian political rhetoric, since translations from Italian would be pointless, as my opening example shows.

### **Indirect speech and structured ambiguity**

Given common Italian stereotypes of their national character, that they are voluble, expressive, and slaves to their hot Latin blood, one would expect Italian political rhetoric to use such facile icons, especially since Italy is relatively homogeneous in terms of ethnicity, religion, and language.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, state building processes in Italy have been relatively successful since the Fascist era, considering the political problems posed by huge differences in history, dialect and local cultures among its regions. Even more interesting is that from the Fascist era onwards, political rhetoric has avoided the major metaphors with which other Western states have constructed their representational engines, namely, icons of blood, descent and ethnicity (although these sometimes have their local uses, for example, on posters in police stations). The problem facing the Italian State is that political rhetoric inadvertently channelled individual feelings of ethnic or cultural identity away from identity signs that might have led to the valorisation of State institutional processes; in other words, the State has been unable to provide institutionalised referents for pre-existing values.

It is possible that the absence of these icons in political rhetoric is responsible for the fact that there has been surprisingly little research by linguists, political scientists and anthropologists along these lines. In fact, there is only one extant analysis of political rhetoric in a modern key, by

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3. I am aware, of course, that language is a thorny theoretical issue when drawing the contours of national identity, and especially in Italy, where illiteracy and regional dialects were widespread. However, all governments since the Fascist era have been successful in imposing standard Italian as the national language. Because this process was completed relatively late compared to other Western European nations, dialects are not used by people as tokens of political identity except by supporters of Northern separation.

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political scientist Giorgio Fedel.<sup>4</sup> His argument ties Italian rhetoric to the political institutions of elections and in particular to the rituals of forming the executive branch of government. His main conclusion appears to be intuitively correct, that Italian political rhetoric differs substantially from its English and German counterparts by its constant appeals to the rules of the system rather than to ideological principles that can, in other nations, be tied to subtexts that define the Self and the Collectivity by means of the metaphor of shared blood. In brief, Italian political rhetoric is a discourse of warnings and comments on the process of managing power, in which the citizenry is viewed as a passive participant. When appeals are made to ideological principles stressing unity, these are extremely abstract and mostly consist of references to individualised morality such as duty, sacrifice and honour.

In fact, political rhetoric is often a form of speech indirection, as years of research on *langue de bois* or *zaum* have attested, and this is what Fedel's analysis reveals:<sup>5</sup> the ostensible audience, whether this be parliamentarians or citizens at large, is often not the intended audience of the speaker; messages are often obliquely redirected to others. Various types of indirection are the use of particular tones, grammatical forms, specialised vocabularies or cadences when speaking (for example, the Plains Indian falsetto when chiefs make political speeches that perforce invoke notions of hierarchy that are normally anathema to these people). By limiting the range of tones, cadences, grammar or the semantic field on these important occasions, speakers create a ritual linguistic field in which the semiotic charge of the lexemes is simultaneously lessened (because in ritual spaces, the link between signifier and signified is broken) and heightened (because in ritual spaces, these relatively denatured and impoverished signs acquire their signifieds within the ritual field and can become metonyms). The result of indirection is that advocacy and authority are detached from culturally-specific notions of individual agency, and it is less clear to the public that a politician is speaking of his own self interests or from a privileged position. The indirect nature of Italian political speech is attested by the tortuous grammar of declarations

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4. There are others, but not dealing with contemporary rhetoric. Cf. Desideri (1984), which mostly analyses Mussolini's speechifying in very classical terms. Only Fedel (1999) applies a theoretical model to modern Italian rhetoric.

5. For an analysis of formal speech and indirection in a Native North American context, see Lanoue (1991).

that invoke *la democrazia* in order to not give explicit voice to the enormous difference in political power between the elite and the citizenry; in the Italian context, the passage I have reproduced above is perhaps one of the most glaring examples but one could (as does Fedel) provide numerous examples.

There are two institutional aspects of the Italian political system that account for the indirect nature of rhetoric, according to Fedel: the first is the Party system and the second is the manner in which the executive arm of the government is formed. I will briefly review each of these points in order to establish the contrast to my own position.

Although Italy is a parliamentary democracy, its many political parties and system of indirect proportional representation for a portion of Parliamentary seats make it unique among Western industrialised countries. As in all parliamentary systems, the executive arm of the government, in practice the cabinet, must have the confidence of parliament in order to formulate and propose laws. However, no single party has ever captured more than 50% of the popular vote or of parliamentary seats since the birth of the post-War Republic in 1948. All governments since that date have therefore been based on political coalitions. As a consequence, political parties are not so much ideological rallying points as they are associations of individuals, each acting as a power broker to his or her own clients and each seeking to augment his or her power while more or less agreeing to leave untouched the rights and privileges of other Party members. They are, in other words, self-help associations to a degree not seen elsewhere in the West. As such, they are extremely flexible and pragmatic on the political and rhetorical levels; as a rule they crave as much power as they can obtain through strategic coalitions, and the only real limits on the extent they are willing to compromise their publicly announced ideological position is in fact the extent that their electorates will accept sudden and radical political shifts, which they will if the payoff is to their economic advantage (for example, 60% of the adult population receives government pensions in one form or another).<sup>6</sup> Hence, most attempts to justify

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6. Italians often use the word *fesso* to describe politically ingenuous attitudes, people who uncritically believe in purified and rarified ideological and cultural positions (e.g., "communists are democratic", "work is dignified"); the closest English translation is "dolt". For a discussion of *fesso* and its opposite, *furbo* (cunning), see Barzini (1966: 166); the date of the reference is itself indicative of how deeply-rooted this mistrust of rhetoric is in Italian popular culture. *Plus ça change.*

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their participation in an uneasy political coalition will strike a rhetorical balance between, on the one hand, giving their supporters a veiled, public message that their strategic interests are safe and, on the other, maintaining public integrity with that small but vocal segment of the electorate that supports them on the basis of ideology.<sup>7</sup> Again, I would cite Aldo Moro's ambiguous speech as a prime example of this paradox that must be resolved through rhetorical indirection, in which the message, ostensibly public, was to members of his own party, the dominant Christian Democrats who wanted to exclude the Left from the executive arm; Moro had become convinced that the only viable way to keep Christian Democrat ideals and interests alive was to attempt an ideological merger and a political coalition with the Left.<sup>8</sup>

The second institutional factor to keep in mind is the manner by which coalitions are formed and how these are ratified by Parliament. Neither the President nor the Prime Minister is directly elected by popular vote. Since no party ever has an absolute majority, the President must call upon the party leader he feels will most likely survive a vote of confidence. This follows a series of consultations with the leaders of all major political parties (in practice this means all parties that obtain more than 5% of the popular vote, which means a great deal of consultation and deal-making takes place between elections and the President's announcement since the political coalitions of the past are no guarantee of solidarity in the present). The

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7. I am not suggesting that this segment of the voters necessarily blindly believes the ideological position of political parties but that they in fact invoke and attribute ideological positions to the parties on the basis of local and private self-interest. Ideology in this sense is "bottom-driven", although I cannot examine this issue here. In support of my assertion, I can cite the Socialist Party's of Italy's (PSI) shift away from socialist principles in the late 1970s under Party leader and later Prime Minister Bettino Craxi. No one appeared troubled when the PSI adopted a centrist, neo-liberal position on most major issues (even becoming anti-communist) while continuing to assert its right to use past Socialist icons (anti-Fascist, anti-monarchical, anti-Catholic) in its rhetorical facade. The change was heralded as a step towards "modernisation" of the party, when in fact it was an attempt to reach a more more powerful electorate that had been irrelevant at the time of the party's foundation in the 1800s, the growing professional and entrepreneurial class.
  8. In 1963, Moro managed to include some Socialists in his Cabinet. He was later kidnapped and killed by the left-wing Red Brigade terrorists in 1978, two years after he had left the Prime Minister's office, and one year after Communists finally entered the Cabinet; many believe Moro was targeted precisely for the victory of his views since a corporatist Cabinet with Communist Party representation undermined the Red Brigade's strategy of polarisation.

designated leader then presents to Parliament the names of his proposed ministers, a list that is the outcome of the feverish political negotiations between party leaders who have agreed (or not) to participate in the government in return for first class seats on the patronage gravy train. It is only then that the would-be Prime Minister faces a vote of confidence and is confirmed or rejected by Parliament. My point is that political rhetoric, especially the speeches of the proposed Prime Minister, while officially addressing the nation and formally resembling the English Speech from the Throne, in fact indirectly address the Parliamentary electorate in an attempt to ensure that the proposed government will survive the vote of confidence. It is important to remember my first point about the nature of Italian political parties: because of proportional representation, parliamentarians feel little loyalty towards their electoral districts. They were not elected to represent the district but to channel centralised power towards selected local interests.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, there is no sense of party discipline in the English or American sense, and even members of the proposed Prime Minister's own party could and sometimes do vote against the proposed list of cabinet ministers. Political rhetoric will once again reflect ambiguous aims: on the one hand, the general electorate is reassured that the public interest is best served by the proposed coalition, and on the other, there are oblique messages that simultaneously reassure members of one's own party that their power will not be unduly diluted by the coalition and thinly veiled threats to parliamentarians of other parties that they must make good on their promises to publicly support the government if they privately agreed to participate in the coalition. Seven-time Prime Minister Giulio Andreotti, now doing commercials for a credit card company (Diner's Club),<sup>10</sup> was considered a past master of this

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9. The number of Italians who can identify their local Deputy is strikingly small even when compared to the United States or to Canada, both countries well known for political apathy by the electorate. It is important to know politicians if one wishes to obtain favours, but not necessarily the politician who represents the Riding.

10. The theme of the commercials consists of Andreotti saying *And I thought I'd seen everything*, in reference to the extent of services now available to cardholders. This is an ironic reference to what most people suspected had been the basis of Andreotti's virtual stranglehold on power for over 30 years, that he had secret files (partially obtained in collusion with the Catholic Church) documenting the weaknesses of his rivals. In a sense, these commercials are an example of self-referential iteration of the political rhetoric for which Andreotti was renowned, the veiled threat.

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simultaneously reassuring and menacing rhetoric. In brief, the structural peculiarities of the institutional arrangements are such that they can explain some features of this rhetoric, especially its constant appeals to the rules of the game at the expense of appeals to ideology, as Fedel has ably noted.

However, I think that this analysis, admirable in itself, is incomplete because it ignores the polysemic aspects of many of these rhetorical signs – “safeguarding democracy”, for example, not to mention “honour” and “duty” in a Catholic country, and especially the trope of society as a social body metaphorised by means of the family; I shall return to this below. Fedel’s structural approach fails to take account of how the signs are used meaningfully by citizens in their daily strategies of social positioning. In other words, I think that the rhetoric of politics is linked to how people constitute themselves socially in non-political dimensions. Politicians are not people who were born on another planet; it only seems that way sometimes.

### **Essential truths**

As Michael Herzfeld points out in *Cultural Intimacy* (1997), rhetoric is not only an artificial form of speech full of bombast and hollow images touching the political arena but is the politics of persuasion that pervades all aspects of social positioning. As such, approaches such as Fedel’s that try to link institutional forms to the semantics of political speech, while certainly not wrong, ignore that the politics of persuasion and the social tensions these engage provide the same raw semiotic material to all participants in forums beyond the political arena. In particular, more than any other strategy of social positioning (no matter the intended target) political rhetoric seeks to convince by appeals to unmoveable, unquestionable and immutable truths, whether these be shared ethnicity, views of political freedom, or notions of social justice. Although almost no one accepts these as unalterable truths in private, very few would willingly risk weakening their status position by stating as such in public because, in fact, these “hollow” images define the relatively neutral ritual space in which conflicting individual interests can be delocalised and subjected to a process of negotiation with impunity for social actors

who invoke the iconic and partially denatured signs within rhetorical space.<sup>11</sup> The analytical problem when dealing with political rhetoric is to identify the truth statements to which it appeals and the semiotic basis of their efficacy or, in other words, analyse how a highly abstract and limited semantic field can easily serve opposed strategic purposes.

Rhetoric appeals to truths that are essentialised by the ritualisation of the commonplace, and by ritualisation I mean the elimination of unwanted signs in a determined social or linguistic space by one of two methods (they are not mutually exclusive): either by constant repetition of a few gestures or words, which makes it virtually impossible that other signs are incorporated into the ritual field; or by strict adherence to a formula of behaviour, speech or even thought, which has the same effect as the first. Signs within the space that survive the purging of other elements increase their semiotic charge precisely because they find their primary signifieds within the field and no longer outside it (though this meaning is not lost altogether: the host in Catholic mass is still bread, and everyone knows it).

The ritual field of Italian rhetoric is dominated by two elements, the idea of the historical past in political rhetoric and the semi-corporeal notion of *la Patria* in popular discourses.<sup>12</sup> I suggest that in Italy, people consider political rhetoric ineffective precisely because it appeals to extremely abstract values which indirectly implicate notions of the individual at the most intimate level, the body and especially the sexual body. This not only ignores the standard metaphorical array of blood and descent, it infringes on individual and local representations of the sexualised body and the family. In other words, two metonymic shifts are involved when political rhetoric is incorporated into popular discourse: first, the metaphor of blood is not

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11. It is not surprising that many liberal positions that attack these Western fundamentals are upper class, that is, protected by status markers other than the prevailing political rhetoric, by the same token blind patriotism is usually the political calling call of the lower middle and lower classes since they possess less cultural capital in Bourdieu's sense.

12. Another way of looking at this is through the notion of purity, which, as Herzfeld and many others have noted, is a central feature of states, concerned as they are with essence expressed through ethnicity. Obviously, by placing the quotidian in a ritual field and thereby eliminating other elements, purity is achieved. However, I am concerned with establishing what happens within the ritual field. In this sense, I think ritualisation may be a common thread that links what happens in North American vision quests, for example, and the processes of rhetorical and semiotic consolidation that are typical of nation-states.

metonymically shifted to the dead blood of agnatic descent in the past but to the hot blood of sex and in particular to the future, as evoked by the trope of sexual reproduction; second, the political non-compliance and the semiotic autonomy of the citizenry is signalled by removing the dimension of descent from the immediate historical past of the nation and by placing it in the mythical past of *la Patria* and its cultural attributes, referred to as *civiltà*, which can be roughly translated as capital-C culture, or by its behavioural expression, *perbenismo*, sometimes translated by the term “breeding”.

### The past and the present

As we know, all Western governments seek a measure of legitimacy in the past, largely because if they control representations of the past they limit the possibilities of political dissent in the present. In other words, by reducing some aspects of social practice to cultural essence, they ritualise and therefore limit the possibilities of political deviance because they institutionalise the process of becoming deviant: no individual Self fits perfectly into the metaphoric social body, whose hermetic perfection is attested by its having survived the passage of time and the political machinations of very different political regimes.

However, Italy is a peculiar case because the social body united by the blood of descent is transmuted to other forms: male *maschismo* and female Madonnas. Indeed, blood is played out only at the local level in terms of the family, and by concretising the family as a locus of personalised social intimacy, the Italian constitution of 1948 paradoxically precludes that this sign can emerge in nationalising discourses, unlike, for example, in the United States. I suspect that blood and its related metonym of agnatic descent are avoided in political rhetoric precisely because the Italian past is a semiotic minefield that no government nor state institution can effectively dominate since, unlike other Western states, Italian state processes and their history are not inscribed with bourgeois values born relatively recently in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and enshrined after the political repressions of 1848. The class whose values should have served as an iconic model for a modern state never dominated the process of state formation. This is largely due to the retrograde influence of the Vatican.

State processes in Italy were and are exceptional by Western European standards, and Rome was and is exceptional even by Italian standards. There are many reasons for this, but what is important are not the 'facts' as such but that these elements have been inscribed in the Roman politics of memory:<sup>13</sup> a) the 1150-year presence of the Vatican (from 728, when the town of Sutri, 50 km north of Rome, was donated to Gregory II by the Longbard king Liutprand, to 1870, when Rome was conquered by Italian troops) as a secular ruler and as an active agent in the suppression of, first, republican values (from the 13th century) and, later, liberal ideologies (from the 17th century onwards), and all this has entailed for social positioning strategies, economic development and semiotic processes attached to values within institutionalised spaces; b) Italian views of the weight of the Imperial and Renaissance pasts interrupted by a nearly nine hundred-year hiatus in Italian *civiltà* (from the Barbarian invasions beginning in the fourth century to the emergence of republican city states in the 12th century) and by a 300 year period of stasis (the Counter Reformation and its negative effects on liberal social movements and discourses); c) finally, the absence of Italian and especially of Roman precedents for liberal-democratic statehood; unlike most northern Italian cities, Rome did not develop a republican *comune* in the late Middle Ages that effectively undermined Vatican control.<sup>14</sup> In the construction of social ideology (which includes justifications for failures and explanations for successes in the politics of social positioning), individuals often cite the combination of an oppressive Church, shifts in the temporal dimension from the tangible past of history to the mythic past of *civiltà*, and weak liberal-democratic values that combined to limit bourgeois control of state institutions and especially to curtail bourgeois influence on state ideologies and their representations. The Vatican never favoured nor even permitted the open social and geographic borders required by bourgeois mercantile and financial activities, not to mention that it actively opposed all attempts to dilute its social and political privileges. Like all such processes of temporal and causal invocation,

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13. As Pandolfi points in her cogent and thought-provoking analysis of the so-called "Southern question" in Italy (Pandolfi, 1998).

14. In Rome, the *comune* was briefly established by Cola di Rienzo, whose republican ideals were quickly contaminated by religious and feudal ideas: he came to think of himself as a divine ruler and was quickly dethroned and killed by the Roman mob.

these “historical” elements are “true” insofar as they resonate with commonly-distributed (in schools, newspapers, etc.) theses in Italian rhetorical practices.

As a result, the limited ranks of the bourgeoisie were filled by people with two opposed social origins, the low-ranking rural aristocracy who could operate at some distance from the Vatican but whose economic base was non-bourgeois land rents, and urban providers of goods and services to the Vatican and to pilgrims.<sup>15</sup> Ironically, the limited social and economic space of the urban bourgeoisie meant these disparate individuals came to share a common obsession: rural estates, where one could retire in times of unrest and from which one could collect land rent from landless peasants who until the beginning of the 20th century may have represented as much as 80 percent of the population, and urban property holdings from which the bourgeoisie could collect rents, conduct its limited business activities, and especially launch its political stratagems designed to penetrate the Vatican Curia.<sup>16</sup> In other words, the northern Italian liberalisation of the 13th and 14th centuries that led to the Renaissance was followed by a growing tendency towards what can only be called semiotic feudalisation, since the growing bourgeois attachment to land is not an atavistic survival but a relatively modern by-product of Vatican dominance. Liberalisation was also followed by a retrograde (by northern European standards) political and economic stasis manifested in cultural bigotry towards lower classes and in a right-wing disdain for liberal politics when these finally emerged in the last quarter of the 19th century. But more than anything else, the closure of the bourgeoisie

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15. From the Middle Ages and especially during the Counter Reformation, the Vatican exercised its power over the locals, especially over the nascent bourgeoisie as providers of goods and services to pilgrims, by using pilgrims as a threat: at least one Jubilee Year was cancelled to punish the Romans, not to mention the discretionary power of the Popes and the Curia to hold public rituals and decide the degree of ostentation.
16. Lazio, especially the 50-60 km. belt surrounding Rome, was devastated in the late Imperial period by the very richness and power of Rome. Although the earth is fertile, it is low-lying (downtown Rome is a mere 19 metres above sea level) and swampy in many places. The various drainage and irrigation systems of the Republic, which had been effective in controlling runoff and the millennium-old scourge of malaria, were abandoned as Roman power grew and foodstuffs were increasingly imported. This and the presence of the Vatican aristocracy created the latifundia system, in which peasants were not small freeholders but tenant farmers. It is only towards the 19th century that various drainage systems were once again installed and the land became productive, with new villages and a small freeholding peasant class encouraged by the Italian state, largely to counter the power of the pro-Vatican landed aristocracy.

meant that it sought to appropriate signs of cultural and social privilege that could not be imitated by others, and it also means that the nascent Italian bourgeoisie was not desirous of the permeable political, social and cultural frontiers that, in other Western countries, became the ethical basis for national (bourgeois) constitutions. In brief, in Italy the past is used as a means of achieving a closed metaphoric field, especially of signs referring to the bourgeoisie, and this trait is writ large on the political rhetoric of the Italian state: the abstract quality and very limited semantic field of Italian political rhetoric is a consequence of the absence of past political elements (referring for the most part to bourgeois processes of liberalisation) that can act as signifieds for contemporary bourgeois, State-sponsored neo-liberalism. The past is therefore far from being semiotically unassailable. This ambiguity is maintained by the citizenry's constant denigration of the State and its political institutions, which effectively counteracts any State attempts to identify non-negotiable truth statements, leaving the rhetorical field of national identity even more limited in political rhetoric, and the possibilities endless for individual social positioning in popular discourses.

When seeking to mine the past to construct the present, for all the alleged richness of its historical ores, the relative newness of the Italian state and especially its failure to create rhetorical points of conjunction with its citizens has resulted in a paradox when Italians speak of or to the past: on the one hand, the visible remains of history – Roman ruins and school curricula that emphasise Imperial Rome as the apogee of civilisation, and recent personal memories of the Fascist imperialist agenda – are everywhere present, obviating the need for inventing the ethnic histories of glorious excess that typify many peoples whose forms of statehood are weak players on the world political stage; on the other, modern state ideologies are particularly shallow and meaningless abstractions to many Italians, creating spectacular potholes on the road to temporal self-realisation within institutional spaces. And neither can these obstacles be avoided: ironically, institutions of social, political and rhetorical control (the bureaucracy and a historicising discourse) have infiltrated all dimensions of personal spaces in Italy precisely because there has never been a clearly *Italian* project of the state: Cavour, Mazzini, and even Alcide de Gasperi, the first post-War Prime Minister, were liberal democrats (and aristocrats, except for de Gasperi) who sought their inspiration abroad, in mostly French and Austrian models since they, like contemporary Italians, were convinced that Italian political traditions were corrupt and second-rate.

Yet not all attempts to situate oneself in the past, ambiguous and difficult as these might be, involve the creation of positive links to semiotic beacons such as Imperial Rome and the Renaissance. There are also negative links to the past, a shared sense that the Italian past is a history of oppression, of loss, of invasion, of exile, of despair. Consequently, one can legitimately speak of the past as a neutral semiotic field, in which individual items are nonetheless highly charged in either positive or negative terms; for each glory of Italian *civiltà*, for each Renaissance masterpiece, for each beautiful garden hidden in Roman courtyards, there is an invasion, a bombardment that destroyed family property, a family member exiled or killed, a dramatic reversal of fortune. Since the past, and especially the historical past of the *nazione* as opposed to the mythical past of *civiltà*, is not all glorious in popular consciousness, its frontiers become as permeable as its contents are varied. The very ease with which one can recover and “discover” (read, invent) signs linking one to the mythical past, combined with the semiotic closure of the upper classes, makes such a journey obligatory; a person without *civiltà*, without a mythical history, is a person with no social identity, just as Italy without a shared national past becomes, in popular discourse, a country with no identifiable political identity. The metonymic inversion between person and statehood – one’s personal past in the semiotics of *civiltà* and the country’s recent past of failed *nazionalità* – is negotiated by means of the metaphor of *la Patria* interpreted as organic bodily urges.

### The land of the father

In discourse, almost no one uses “nation”; Italy is either *il paese* (“country”, which is also used for “village”) or *la Patria*. Significantly, political rhetoric uses *paese* while people use *la Patria*. All Western countries to some extent use this trope and have more than faint echoes of patriarchal values that imbibe their social and political institutions, but no one compares to the country of the Madonna complex for the power and pervasive nature of the father archetype as metaphor for the body, and the potent male body as the metaphor for society (and the female body as metaphor of the family; in fact, Italian male *machismo* could be seen, tongue firmly in cheek,

as an exaggerated reaction to female domination of private spaces).<sup>17</sup> Nowhere is patriarchal authority more present than in the centuries-old rhetoric of the Vatican and its subsequent influence on Italian political values and thought; nowhere is patriarchal authority more absent than in the popular metaphoric uses of the body trope. Here, it is nature that wins over politics, sex over patriarchal authority.

As many others have noted (see especially Herzfeld, 1987 and 1993), compared to bands and tribes, the metaphoric field of shared representations in nation-states is considerably narrowed. The process of narrowing is not only historical and functional – the need to deploy very abstract signs to integrate ever larger numbers of people divided by geography, class, origins and race – but metonymic: in nation-states, signifiers become signifieds not within a ritual field composed of several elements, which eventually allow the metonymic shifts typical of mythical logic in bands and in tribes, but within limited semantic fields composed of only one metaphor, the body and its blood, which encompasses the signified within the signifier. Metaphorically, these signs stand for the collective but metonymically they refer to themselves individually; for example, fatherland or its equivalents, in most European languages is marked for gender; a grammatically feminine word with a masculine semantico-lexical content, containing thus two metaphoric fields within the same sign, public spaces which are male and private spaces which are female.<sup>18</sup> To a certain extent the hermetic nature of the dominant icons is preserved by adding a temporal dimension which, ironically, makes these icons timeless: placing the origins of these shared metaphoric representations of the collectivity in the past makes the field all the more impervious to possible metonymic shifts that would

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17. In this context, see I. Magli, *Per una rivoluzione italiana* (1996), a quite extraordinary book for its logical leaps and simple views of culture and society, yet that consistently uses the body as a trope that refers to abstract political Power (everywhere capitalised). However, Magli is however highly critical of the state and it is not surprising that she does not use the rhetorical signs of the elite when discussing power.

18. In Russian, the link is more subtle: *rodina* is feminine with no direct reference to “father” but it is based on *rod*, clan or line, which is grammatically masculine and metaphorically patrilineal. In German, *vaterland* and *mütterreich* are both grammatically neutral but obviously marked by their lexical components, one masculine and the other feminine: two words that share the same signified and thus the same metaphoric doubling as their French and Italian counterparts. Delaney reports (1995: 177) a parallel situation in Turkish, *Devlet Baba* (‘Father State’) and *Anavatan* (‘motherland’).

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legitimate other, alternative metaphors in the present. The code shifts that metonymy normally makes possible between, for example, physiological and meteorological processes in so-called primitive myth, are in the mythology of the nation-state metaphorically active only in the past and metonymically static in the present.

However, these icons are polysemic so some shifts from one domain to another should be feasible. In fact, shifts occur but not metonymically from one domain to another but metaphorically within the metaphor's semantic field. The metaphoric body of the nation is metonymically a geographic code that mirrors the political shift from north to centre (from Milan to Rome), and from centre to north metaphorically (torso to head). Since the shifts are within the same metaphoric field, the Italian social body is prone rather than standing (which is also a fitting irony for popular views of its political incarnation, *la nazione*), and popular appeals to the values of *la patria* involve a northern shift, a Roman appropriation of the northern "head" by the central "guts". Not to stretch a semiotic point too much, but Northern League critiques of Roman government literally use this physiological metaphor when speaking of their disproportionate tax contribution to the state – Rome "eats" everything – not to mention the widespread usage of "eat" to describe Roman political corruption; and as one moves geographically and metaphorically farther south, it is not surprising to find in popular discourses a preponderance of stereotypes accenting southern male sexual potency, as one does in nearly all Western countries that use the corporeal metaphor. However, in Italy these metaphors rarely find their way into political rhetoric precisely because of the enormous gulf between explicit signifiers in the present and implicit signifieds in the past that I have mentioned above.

By naturalising the body, people create an apparently a fixed reference point from which all else appears as symbolic, as Butler suggests in her brilliant book *Bodies that Matter* (Butler, 1993). In other words, if naturalisation imposes limits on signification within the imaginary, then it imposes limits on all processes of signification by defining what is signifiable and what is not. Naturalising the body by exaggerating or calling excessive attention to its sexual dimension therefore distinguishes the signifiable from the non-signifiable, and this means that the essentialising strategies of the State (which are presented as as the symbolic representation of society) create their own boundary condition. Similarly, citizens who sexualise and thus

underline the body's "naturalness" do so in part because of the limits inherent in Statist metanarratives of the social body I have described above, and in part to appropriate and to concretise what is presented to them in very unidimensional terms. In so doing, they create their own essentialism and confirm the gap between State and citizenry, but it is a gap of their own making and to a certain extent subject to their control: sexuality becomes rampant as the citizen's identification with political processes weakens.

It is left to the disempowered citizenry to exploit this fertile semiotic space, verbally and visually, between the past and the present and between the State as family (in political rhetoric) and the family as a over-sexed body (in popular discourse). Italy is a *sexy* country, with both men and women participating in the metaphorisation of sexuality, as anyone who has spent any time there can attest. By appropriating this distinctive metaphoric field, citizens divorce themselves from the state's dry, idealistic, disembodied rhetoric of authority, shifting power from the State as "head" to the people as "guts" and sexual organs.<sup>19</sup> In brief, by appropriating the metaphoric field of the body and especially its reproductive function, the citizenry creates an acceptable compromise between themselves and the State: the metaphoric control of the future (sex = reproduction) is in their hands while the political power of the present is in the hands of the elite. In other words, for all the avowed republicanism of the Italian political elite, their rhetoric is an exact reprise of the rhetoric of the Vatican Counter-Reformation and its politics of sexual repression. The failure to overcome these limits forces the elite to use naked power as a means of social and political control to a degree that is unusual in the Western context, and obliges the citizenry to extol the implied inversion of the elite's identification with "Protestant" and asexual Weberian institutions.

My generalisations about the sexualisation of the social body are far from hermetic. "Popular" discourse is far from equally shared among all segments of the population. Class distinctions play a major role in how people see *la Patria* and in particular how they appropriate and sexualise this sign. Although I cannot do justice to the complexity of local social practices, I would like to mention that Italian men and women who primarily identify with the upper reaches of the social pyramid (in practice, the bourgeoisie)

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19. I would also argue that the Italian obsession with food, as a source of the good life, health and social well-being, is a similar metonymic shift from head to guts.

are generally very prudish in public when it comes to displaying, in dress and in behaviour, overt signs of sexuality and sensuality, in contrast with lower middle and working class people. Several hypotheses may be adduced: such reserve may simply be a product of social snobbery, as in the old joke about the Duchess who belatedly discovers that the poor also fuck, but that it's too good for them – if they're doing it, at least they shouldn't enjoy it so much. However, I think the situation is more complex. The bourgeoisie, like many other Italians regardless of their class, are patriotic even though many of them are very critical of the State and of *nazionalità*. In fact, their open patriotism and pride in their Italian cultural identity (and shame at their Italian political identity) is somewhat surprising considering the negative semiotic markers with which the bourgeoisie is associated; conservative, priggish, repressive and repressed, close-minded, staid, and so forth, as well as the fairly recent attacks on their category by, first, the Fascists and, second, students and youth in the 1968 uprisings. I would argue that bourgeois patriotism vis-à-vis their *Patria* is in fact the dry, abstract and idealised counterpart of the metaphorically sexualised *patria* of the lower classes. The bourgeoisie possess sufficient cultural and especially social capital that they can afford to distance themselves from the sexuality of 'popular' discourse and maintain their relatively privileged position while sharing with the "popular classes" (as they are called in Italian) the same process of semiotic distancing from the State by means of *la patria* and a heavy-handed critique of State institutions. However, like the rhetoric of the political field, their cultural patriotism and pride are expressed more in terms of traits that can be idealised, such as their patriotic support of Italian *civiltà*, rather than in terms that can be immediately traced to the private body projected onto public social spaces.

I would also add that, recently, Italian public sexiness seems to be lessening among the upper classes (where it was never very strongly expressed, as I have said) as Italy becomes more "European" (i.e., politically modifying certain standards to be in line with EC laws). I do not think that the reduction in sexiness is a result of northern European contamination or of Italians imitating northern European behavioural norms. As power becomes ever more concentrated in Brussels and Strasbourg in the hands of often nameless committees, national governments, especially those national governments that were always secondary to Europeanisation (for example, Italy, Spain, Greece), become increasingly irrelevant to most people's lives,

and the politics of representation shifts (and will continue to shift) accordingly. Not surprisingly, television, the virtual homeland of the disempowered, has become increasingly sexier in the last two or three years.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, it is popular to speak of globalisation and its pernicious link to the fragilisation of nation-state essentialisms. While it is true that Europe is undergoing a process of Brussellisation as more powers are shifted from national governments to nameless, non-elected committees in the EC, the study of Italian political rhetoric suggests more questions than answers about the apparently inevitable disintegration of state control of representations. Never having successfully used ethnic notions of blood and common descent as a unifying glue in its nationalist representations, it is not surprising that the Italian State does not invoke them now as their political legitimacy becomes ever more ephemeral, nor is it surprising that increasingly disempowered citizens develop metaphors of resistance that both incorporate and subvert patriarchal images of *la Patria's* social body by metonymic shifts from the head to the centre and therefore appropriate responsibility for social reproduction.

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