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# **WE, THE BARBARIANS REFLECTIONS ON THE ITALIAN ANOMALY**

Who are the barbarians? They are usually said to come from the outside and to possess no faces. They are also said to be “the others”. In today’s Italy the barbarians are most commonly associated with the immigrants, for whom even the passage from clandestine to legal status is not enough to render them “visible” **157**

But what if, on the contrary, it is us who are the barbarians? Recently, in the daily Italian newspaper *La Repubblica* a short debate was launched between Alessandro Barrico, a novelist, and Eugenio Scalfari, the founder of the paper and an established essayist. Barrico claimed that the “new barbarians” will be the men and women who have learned through the internet to navigate only the surface of things and avoid the trappings of false depth. Scalfari, though, urged for more caution and invited us to instead reflect on our own current barbarization. I would, in general, like to opt for this second suggestion, for I believe that the projection contained by the first is an unaffordable luxury. I believe that our ongoing barbarization is carried by a wide-spread and unifying underculture successfully promoted by today’s style of Italian government.

This undercultural consensus, that I call “the Italian anomaly”, possesses all the traits characteristic of modern barbarity. These traits have quite a history: they were already foreseen by Pier Paolo Pasolini when he spoke of anthropological mutation, and have since turned into phantoms not easy to exorcise – even by those who have managed to maintain at least a small stock of critical

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spirit. It is as if a kind of fog or gel or glue had engulfed everything: from public discourse to individual forms of existence.

It is truly we that are the barbarians, for it seems there is almost no-one capable of escaping this fog, even though some still struggle to maintain at least a couple of well-lit zones. I would say that no-one is fully able to resist a model of living characterized by the values of material wealth and personal success, along with the (real or merely desired) enjoyment of these so-called values. From the standpoint of material wealth and its consequential enjoyment, however, rules of democracy prove to be mere pesky obstacles to be circumvented. I am not sure if the word “fascism” can still be used to any effect today, but we are certainly dealing with a specific variety of what Michel Foucault had termed “biopolitics” But this is not about defining the phenomenon, it is, rather, about patiently describing it.

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If one wants to circumvent the obstacle of rules and, with that, of democratic legality, one first has to dissolve democracy while simultaneously claiming this is being done in the very name of democracy and freedom. Democracy and freedom are to appear as if scotched by their own intricacy: they are to be released and unburdened if we wish to continue to function and take action – where functioning and taking action means (in today’s wide-spread new language) realizing the dominant model of living. It is a warning meant for everyone, from a young temporary laborer, to the unemployed, from one who has already felt the weight of material dispossession, to one who has found himself in a fix due to her race, age or gender. All of them are supposed to possess the opportunity to turn into cunning self-promotors, either thanks to their personal enterprise or to mere “cunningness”, an ancient dowry of the Italian character that today sees its promotion into a social standard.

An impressive string of incidents of corruption, that has led the judicatory to become such an important (and so ferociously disputed) subject in Italy, is seen by the public as if it were a mere case of the hiccups. Of course, no “normal” citizen would openly declare herself in favor of corruption, but it seems that the crime of corruption has today been degraded in the eyes of the public into a minor offence hardly worth our interest. This has resulted in the general mindset shifting towards adapting oneself to strategies of cunningness, – dictated by private interest and reaffirmed by an enterprise logic modeled on the government –, and not only to adapting to it but also to occasionally singing its praises. A further effect of this is the absolute perversion of political practice: every day political action becomes a bit more demoted in the eyes and heads of the citizens, presented as a vicious circle, a waste of time, a straying away

from true objectives. This enables the reduction of the so called political class, crowding for space on television talk shows, to a spectacle for idiots, and we can no longer wonder at the complete lack of a generational exchange. Why would a young person even enter into politics? If anything, it is the rich and powerful who have completely staked that field these days.

As you can see it is not always necessary to repeat the crucial question of “the conflict of interests” that has shadowed Silvio Berlusconi since his first entrance into the world of politics at the beginning of the 90’s: in fact, it was this very conflict that accelerated that “descent” that has since been hammered as an ever more influential and glaring nail into the Italian institutional scene. The political opposition (then in power) was at a loss how to confront it – or perhaps even lacked a desire to do so. How many decrees and so-called laws *ad personam* (and sometimes *ad aziendam*<sup>1</sup>) have been passed in these years? Even now (at the end of 2010), despite large-scale problems in the field of employment and appalling social conditions, the prime minister’s main concern is to protect himself against the presupposed aggression of jurisdiction – via an institutional shield, and through a foretold attempt to *ex lege* domesticate the autonomy of the judiciary.

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We do not even need to recall that this “conflict of interests” regards the ownership of television as a crucial source of creating political and cultural consensus. Even a minimal dosage of old Marx suffices to see how in Italy the ownership of means of production is perversely connected to political leadership, leading to effects that any democracy would consider an anomaly. The media monopoly is creating a culture of submission within a State that is ever more reminiscent of a firm and that has transformed itself above all into an electoral machine or an incessant practice of acquiring consensus through the media.

We have been living this anomalous situation of interest conflict in Italy for so long now that it seems that the very word “conflict” has evaporated: the anomaly has become cultural normality and only a very small minority is still willing to correct it. The sense of it being a perverse practice is diminishing: it is as if most of us had already digested the idea that public and personal interests are intertwined and that they are to progress together in a natural, almost physiological manner. And, if this is in fact so, that each citizen should fend for himself in this plexus of interests or at least “experience” it in a way that will let him reap the most personal benefit.

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1 An untranslatable wordplay that suggests the meaning »in the benefit of companies«.

What, then, is here barbaric; what are the signs and symptoms of our barbarization? They are, first and foremost, the acceptance of a language (the parlance of an underculture), in which the public and the private blend into a single dimension (within that above-mentioned fog) and overlap into a single cliché of a lifestyle. The projection of this cliché onto the persona of the prime minister has become a general phenomenon of identification that surpasses any “political” consciousness of individuals. The corroded critical consciousness has found itself in an impasse: it cannot refer itself to the historically topped models opposing this cliché and it seems at least momentarily unable to produce new ones. The only possible solution is a battle on all fronts, a battle against this dominant underculture, against the barbarity that has settled in every one of our souls.

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This stance, that I deem “*etica minima*”, is an appeal towards a sort of “courage of truth”, and each one of us should first and foremost apply it auto-critically, for no-one can “count himself out” or claim to be immune to barbarity. We should, so to speak, re-count everything and take nothing for granted. We should discard all convictions in a supposed truth and arm ourselves with an uncommon analytical patience to take on that subjectivity we still consider our own.

I would like to take as an example the so-called “question of morality”. Is public morality the same as personal? And what weight does this word “morality” hold for us today? Our answer to the first question might be yes, both moralities should form a single unit; but this unity would today be completely at odds with the traditional idea of a “common good”. And, again taking the current condition into account, we should answer the second question by finding that the word “morality” has almost completely lost its weight and has become slippery and inconsistent.

The sense of responsibility in governing public affairs has been the subject of several debates complaining of its diminishment or even disappearance; the nature of these complaints, however, is more rhetorical than practical and most often, they fade into a brittle moralism leaving no trace the morning after. These discourses are all façade and seem to lack any substantial power. What it finally comes down to is the public space giving an effect of being completely estranged to morality: as the rhetoric fades, the only thing left with any effect is the “cynicism” of one sided interests that has today gained the status of the real value to be practiced and realized. The so-called “common good” has been degraded into an eventual side-effect or something marginally useful (as far as it still capable of creating a consensus). Tax evasion, wide-spread

illegality, favoritism and even abuse of power have become practices gradually unburdened of moral prohibition. Some of them are even praised by the members of the government as prudent and therefore recommendable practices, so it is clear that these practices, already wide-spread among the populace, will receive a kind of popular legitimization. To confirm this wide-spread public cynicism one only has to take a look at the wealth of material associated with the recent string of Italian scandals.

Similar reflections could be made on the value of personal dignity or the private dignity of public personas. A decadent life or sexual affairs may cause public uproar, games of reprisal and publication of confidential documents, but they fail to actually disqualify a political persona, who usually resorts to claims about their right to a personal life of their own choice. Even the Church, when it does decide to raise its voice in the defense of morality, goes unheeded, but then again it hardly seems in a credible position to preach.

But let us observe these things carefully. The private sphere is playing a double and contradictory game: on the one hand it evokes the sacrosanct right to “privacy” (Cf. the whole controversy on phone bugging); and on the other it talks of the intertwinement of the public and private as if it were an immutable historical fact. I believe that it is precisely here that the true face of barbarity is revealed: the point is not merely in the diminishing of moral values or in permissiveness, the point is in models that can be emulated and identified with. The decadent life of affluent and politically influential people has become the object of general envy. Who doesn’t want to live in a luxurious mansion? Who would say no to the exciting mixture of prestige and sex? Or to lighting fast careers with the star role guaranteed? Through his biography the prime-minister seems to be reassuring his subjects: “If you are lucky, if you take risks and if you do like I do, you too can have a life like this.” How many have gone for this bait? How many have managed to truly avoid it?

They say all of this is the result of crafty propaganda, in the commercial sense of the term. They also say that this world is fake and artificial. While this is certainly so, we should nevertheless admit that the interplay of true and false is today – in the world of television underculture and a regime that holds sway over the world through that very media – has become so complex that it has become a highly difficult task to carry out the critical operation of distinguishing with precision between the true and the false. Perhaps the most evocative symptom of our current barbarity is this extreme difficulty we encounter when trying to draw this dividing line – provided that we choose to attempt drawing it at all.

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If the battle for morality is today one that seems to have been lost from the outset, all we are left with is the possibility to insist on a minimal line of resistance and hold fast to some impassable rampart. It is but a hope but into this hope we pour all of our citizen indignation. A sticky gelatin surrounds and engulfs us, but we should still insist on one point: we are not passive subjects to this gelatinous power, but its accomplices, we are the ones who have given in to this adhesive, albeit automatically. So where does one begin? We possess no political recipes; all we know is that barbarity is not simply outside us but is at work within us, often with our own consent; it is, therefore, part of our very lifestyle, and as such, something that we still have some say in.

If we are to find at least a morsel of truth to provide us with a sense of direction, we should perhaps look for it in our own lives, in the inception of a cultural transformation and in the courage to take on such an inception. It is a risky strategy, but in its absence any political or social move can only mean a step in the wrong direction.