

# **Berlusconi of the Left?**

## **Nichi Vendola and the “narration” of the new Italian Left**

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### **1. Introduction**

While news media report on the last wave of scandals involving the Italian prime minister, a simple truth is becoming painfully apparent, both in Italy and abroad. Silvio Berlusconi's success has not simply been down to his heavy level of control of Italian media, but also to the continuing lack of a credible and appealing Left alternative. Despite the gloomy state of the Italian Left there might finally be a leader who could challenge Berlusconi's hegemony by rivalling his communicative artfulness. We are talking about the volcanic governor of Apulia (the heel of the Italian boot) Nichi Vendola, that person who news media in Italy have already dubbed the “Berlusconi of the Left” because of his media-savvyness and televised charisma.

Combining in the same persona the identities of communist, gay and christian the ear-ring wearing, poetry-enthusiast Nichi Vendola has been one of the very few success stories in the Italian Left in recent years and a very telling one. He has won political campaigns against all odds, countering the political establishment and the party apparatuses of the Left, and has cast himself as maverick fighting for a “better Italy” against the “worse Italy” the world knows all too well. Having recently founded a new party of the Sinistra, Ecologia e Liberta' (Left, Ecology and Freedom) he now hopes to run as the centre-left candidate in the next political elections. A contest where he might well win given that he currently enjoys a 48% approval ratings in the polls, against the 36% of beleaguered Silvio Berlusconi.

Instrumental in Vendola's political success has been the adoption of innovative political communications, ranging from aggressive electoral posters, to dedicated Facebook and Youtube pages to attract young voters and memorable TV appearances. In the process Vendola has made a name for himself as one of those rare politicians in the contemporary Italian Left who are good at “getting the message across”, and at mastering that communicative craft which has made Berlusconi's fortune.

Despite Berlusconi's and Vendola's huge difference in political ideology it is undeniable that they share much in terms of their approach to the electorate, practicing a politics which centres

around their own persona and which uses the media to construct a direct contact between the people and the leader, which can only be defined as populist (though not necessarily in a derogatory sense). But to what extent is the label “Berlusconi of the Left” more of a journalistic *ballon d'essai*, and an expression which can capture the nature of Vendola's political venture? What are the considerations which have led Vendola to the decision of appropriating the enemy's weapons? And what are the opportunities and risks faced by this process of appropriation?

Focusing on the political communications of Nichi Vendola, this article advances a cultural analysis of the contemporary Italian Left, highlighting how the “Vendola phenomenon” points to a series of tensions and dilemmas which are faced by progressive politics in a media age in Italy and beyond. It argues that Vendola is the manifestation of a personalist Left populism, which fully engages with the realm of mediated spectacle and celebrity politics, in the attempt of filling the symbolic void resulting from the lack of strong collective progressive identities.

## **2. The queer man from Terlizzi**

Key in Vendola's political success has been his own peculiar *persona*, setting him apart from most leaders of the Left, whose public image often has been tainted by a bureaucratic or professorial demeanor. Nevertheless, Vendola's political career was not much different from the one of many unlovable party cadres of the Left. He was born in 1958 in Terlizzi, a small town in Apulia, the heel of the Italian boot, and became involved in politics at 14 years old when he entered the Italian Communist Party (ICP). At the university he studied literature and wrote a dissertation about Marxist writer and film-maker Pier Paolo Pasolini, before becoming a journalist for the ICP house organ *L'Unita'* and a leading gay rights activist. He was elected to parliament in 1992 - a seat which he held till 2005 - in the ranks of Rifondazione Comunista (Communist Refoundation) the wing of the ICP which did not want to turn social-democratic and became vice-president of the anti-mafia parliamentary committee. It was however only in 2005 that he rose to the status of national celebrity when he ran in the left coalition primaries for the regional election of Apulia.

Against all odds he beat a more moderate candidate, the young economist Francesco Boccia, supported by the Left political establishment, and went on to narrowly defeat the centre-right candidate Raffaele Fitto in what was traditionally known as a staunchly conservative region. In 2010 the Partito Democratico (named after the American Democratic Party), the main party of the centre-left, combining the social-democratic wing the former ICP and progressive former Christian Democrats, plead him not to re-run in order to open the coalition to the centrist party Udc who disliked him. He refused to do so, and in the primary elections, in which he ran for a second time

against Francesco Boccia, he conquered 67% of the votes and went on to easily beat the centre-right candidate Rocco Palese.

Vendola's visibility in the national media has risen dramatically since 2009, when he abandoned his long-time party Rifondazione Comunista, and established a new party, called Sinistra, Ecologia e Libertà' (Left, Ecology and Freedom) which does not carry the hammer-and-sickle symbol, the former comrades of Rifondazione did not want to abandon. SEL (as the party is called in the short form) unites former members of Rifondazione together with splinters coming from the Green Party and the Democrats of the Left and according to recent polls enjoys a 10% support in the electorate. Betting on the collapse of Berlusconi's government in the next months and on snap elections later this year, Vendola has since the beginning of 2010, repeatedly announced his intention to run for the primaries of the centre-left coalition, in order to become the candidate prime minister for the centre-Left coalition.

Vendola, like Berlusconi has earned his followers among a disillusioned electorate which has matured a deep distrust for the "party form" and for political institutions which are notoriously corrupted. His opposition to the political establishment, has allowed him to cast himself as an underdog and a maverick appealing, mobilising the power of the people against an unjust authority, in a way which mirrors Berlusconi's own attempt to present himself as an outsider in the "theatre of politics" and a victim of the "politicised" judicial system. If Berlusconi has targeted the cynicism of the right-wing electorate, which did not feel represented by professional politicians, Vendola has harvested the discontent of the more progressive electorate for the hesitant and feeble Partito Democratico, born out of a "cold fusion" between the more progressive wing of the former Christian Democrats and the majority of the Italian Communist Party turned social-democrat.

What will happen in the volatile Italian political scene in the next months, and whether Vendola will indeed succeed to Silvio Berlusconi is hard to say. But the unlikely rise of a "communist" and an outspoken gay to such heights despite the barrage of Berlusconi's propaganda machine provides alone with an interesting case study to assess the prospects of progressive politics in a media age. Specifically, Vendola's case might help us to excavate the emotional and identity processes which intervene in the display of "spectacular", rather than discursive forms of political performance, precisely those forms which Berlusconi has perfected and where Vendola is following suit. Moreover it might help us to gauge the extent to which political spectacle might be turned to progressive ends, contributing to the construction of a resonant new Left identity and cultural imaginary which at the moment is seemingly missing both in Italy and abroad.

### 3. Coping with Berlusconi's “spectacular” public sphere

A discussion of the “Vendola phenomenon” cannot begin without a discussion of the transformation of the Italian public sphere in the period from the 80s onwards marked by the political and cultural rise of media magnate Silvio Berlusconi. Key in his success as widely evidenced by pundits and scholars alike has been his direct control of the national media system and of his undeniable ability in public speaking and stage-managment. Berlusconi is the exponent of a media age, in which the field of symbolic production has become a centre-piece not only of the social and of the economic system. During his career as media entrepreneur, which began in the late 70s, Berlusconi was responsible for shaping the culture of commercial television. He did so by mixing American sitcoms and Latin American soap opera with in-house programmes, invariably boasting beautiful *soubrettes* in skympy dress, to target the wet-dreams and the rising individualist of an economically thriving Italy.

With his three terrestrial TV channels he acquired a strategic position not only in the economic but also in the political system. And he scruplessly exploited this capital since his entrance into the political arena. Far from abandoning the helm of his media empire (as a true liberal like he claims to be would have done), he continued to control it tightly, using it as a very powerful and sophisticated propaganda machine to constantly influence the political climate in Italy and shield off accusations of corruptions. But the direct ownership of the overwhelming majority of Italian commercial broadcasting would not have been sufficient for his impressive political success if it would not have been for his formidable performances, reminiscent of his youth experience as entertainer on cruise-ships.

The fact that through his gaffe and communicative incontinence, he has earned the nicknames of “joker” and “buffoon”, has sometimes led to overlook his undeniable ability in stage-managment and “presentation”, skills which are decisive in the context of a contemporary mediated politics. Berlusconi has been the champion of a spectacular politics resorting to furious monologues and tirades, carefully staged video-messages and dramatic public events in which he could construct around his persona a sense of common identity among his rather disparate followers. At the same time he has despised all platforms of public debate and institutional communication, shying away from critical interviewers and from policy discussion with political rivals.

While Berlusconi has artfully exploited his control of the media system by matching it with convincing acting, the Left has been taken by surprise by the “spectacular” turn impressed by Berlusconi to the Italian public sphere. The support of robust civil society organisations and of

partisan media, traditional weapons of the Italian Left in its ideological “war of position”<sup>1</sup> against the Right did not seem to provide a sufficient countervailing cultural force vis-a-vis the capillary reach and the glamour of Berlusconi's televisions. In the broadcasting system the Left could only rely on the traditional loyalty of Rai 3, the third public channel, an heritage of *lottizzazione* (political apportionment) of the public broadcasting during the Prima Repubblica. Faced with a media system and in particular a broadcasting system overwhelming biased against it, the Left was easily cornered and “upstaged” in its uncertain performance by the impetuousness of Silvio Berlusconi.

The Left reaction to this situation was the denunciation of contemporary mediatised<sup>2</sup> and especially televised politics, which came to be seen as inherently and irremediably evil, especially in the more radical and counter-cultural end of the Left, in a way reminiscent of Adorno's characteristic distaste for the “cultural industry” and of Guy Debord's critique of the “society of the spectacle”<sup>3</sup>. Such moral rejection of mediated and “spectacular” politics went together with the idea that to the untruthful propaganda displayed by Berlusconi, and the emptiness of his political marketing, the Left should respond with a resort to local forms of political mobilisation and face-to-face communication and to an appeal to the evergreen values of solidarity and democracy as they are enshrined in the beloved Italian constitution of 1948<sup>4</sup>.

This reaction however proved to be self-defeating. Berlusconi grew in power and approval ratings also thanks to the shortcomings of the Left which governed the country for 5 years between 1996 and 2001, under the leadership of 4 different prime ministers. The scandals which time and again would stain his reputation abroad, did not seem to worry too much the domestic public. And the “moralist” turn of the Left, of the kind advocated by Mammone in the January issue of *Soundings*, has not seem so far to provide with a successful antidote to the magnetic attraction exercised by Berlusconi over large sections of the Italian electorate. In fact in several polls a (narrow) majority of Italians has made clear that they did not care too much about Berlusconi's private behaviour, for how much many of his scandals involve very public crimes indeed.

In reacting to Berlusconi's cultural offensive, the Left has fallen prey of a fundamental misunderstanding. It has believed for a long time that Berlusconi success was simply down to his ability to “dupe” the gullible and ignorant electorate thanks to his control of the media system. And in the process it has overlooked the fact the as suggested by a recent article of Christian Raimo on

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1 Gramsci uses the term “war of position” to describe the cultural and ideological struggle which unfolds in the ramparts of civil society, and differs from the “war of movement” of revolutions.

2 For a discussion of mediatised politics the reader can refer to Entman's and Bennett's *Mediated Politics* (2002)

3 ----- Adorno, the Cultural Industry

4 This second response is the one Mammone argues for in article published in the January issue of *Soundings*, which criticises the lack of morality in the Italian Left.

the daily of the Left *il manifesto* Berlusconi has not been effective in convincing the Italian people about the good of his argument, but has rather been a master in captivating it through the vigor of his spectacle. And it is precisely at this level, the construction of a political spectacle that an antidote to “Berlusconism” should be found, Raimo argues. The “Vendola phenomenon” provides with many insights to assess this crucial question.

#### 4. Adopting the enemy's weapons

Characteristic of Vendola's political venture in the panorama of the Italian Left has been the way in which he has engaged unashamedly with the same terrain of mediated and spectacular politics, which has been the trademark of Berlusconi's political success. The Apulian governor, has a fame for being a pragmatist and this practical attitude is evident at the level of his innovative use of party political communications, which played an important role in many of his political campaigns. Telling at this level has been Vendola's adoption of those techniques of “political marketing”, which are held by many in the Left as a distortion of truthful political debate.



Fig. 1: Vendola's campaign posters, regional elections 2005

An example of Vendola's enthusiastic and “heretic” use of political marketing techniques is exemplified by the communication prepared in occasion the regional elections for governor of Apulia in 2005. Having won the primaries on a wave of grassroots support, ranging from the third sector of leftist co-operatives and NGOs to the Catholic Church, Vendola approached the contest with the help of inventive Apulian marketing firm Proforma, which he would use again the 2010 re-election campaign<sup>5</sup>.

Proforma designed a famous series of aggressive posters, whose rationale was to positively reclaimed all the derogatory and fear-mongering labels thrown by the Right at Vendola before and during the campaign. “Subversive” read in bold one of the posters above the caption “because I always put the last first”. “Dangerous” proclaimed another, only to add “as are all honest people”. The poster campaign, which was later to be prized at the University of Rome 3's “Gala della Politica” political communications festival, was the most iconic feat of a campaign conducted using catchy election videos and creative slogans which tried hard to avoid the traditional “boring” language of the Left with the attempt to stimulate curiosity in the electorate.

The adoption of political marketing message did not mean however to automatically water down the radicalism of Vendola's political project to appeal to the moderate vote. To the contrary the campaign stood out for its unashamed antagonism and its appeal for social change: something rarely seen in the communications of Partito Democratico, constantly worried to cast itself as a “quiet” and “reasonable” force, to deflect Berlusconi's accusation of being still “communist”.



*Fig. 2: Vendola's defiant look on the political talk-show Annozero*

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5 Proformaweb.it

Apart from his daring use of political marketing techniques, Vendola has also earned his reputation as a media-savvy politician, through his frequent and memorable appearance in the several political talk-shows which Italian TV. When invited as guest at political talk-shows as *Annozero*, *Ballaro*, *Porta a Porta*, Vendola typically displays an emotionally charged style of political presentation, which using a metaphoric language imbued with reminiscences of Gramsci and Pasolini dissects the social and economic problems of the country.

A high point of his TV presence took place in December 2010 in occasion of a show of the programme *Vieni via con me*, presented by broadcaster Fabio Fazio and emerging anti-mafia journalist Roberto Saviano, when he read a list of forms of torture which in the past would have been inflicted to homosexuals like him (quite a sensational TV moment in a notoriously homophobic country like Italy). In another occasion, hosted at the political talk show *Anno zero* he made a story of hurling the insult “vaffanculo” (to be euphemistically translated as “go to hell”) against Berlusconi's chief whip Maurizio Gasparri, who was accusing him of involvement in a corruption scandal which had claimed a member of his regional government. These examples set Vendola apart among leftist leaders, whose television performances are notoriously soporific and often get lost in technical explanation of policy details, which Vendola usually avoids to concentrate on highly emotional and dramatic messages.



*Fig. 3: Still from a Vendola's Youtube video during the 2010 Apulia primaries*



In the 2010 elections Vendola also made a name for himself as a pioneer of “politics 2.0” in Italy, through his use of Facebook (390,000 friends and counting) and of videolettere (video-letters) broadcasted via YouTube to his supporters. The web campaign, orchestrated once again by Proforma, his marketing agency, run in parallel to the establishment of local support groups based in dedicated locales named the “Fabbriche di Nichi” (Nichi's factories), where political debates would take place alongside fund-raising events, in an attempt to reinvent local political spaces reminiscent of both the “case del popolo” people's house of the ICP and of the “centri sociali”, the squatted social centres of the Italian counter-cultural Left.

These different levels of Vendola's communications reflect the intention of creating what Vendola himself has repeatedly called a “new narration”. While Vendola himself, has never given a precise definition of what it precisely means by this term (and other synonyms he has used like affabulation or story-telling), the gist of his reasoning is that there an urgent need for the establishment of a new Left culture in order to make up for the erosion of the communist heritage. This is a very ambitious project, and one which, in my view, correctly identifies in the cultural disarray and self-referentiality of the Italian Left, the most important reason for its political failures in recent years. But to what extent can this project of a “new narration”, with its reclaiming of the terrain of spectacle, constitute the starting point for the construction of a strong New Left identity independent of Vendola's unifying charisma?

## **5. Filling the emptiness of a post-identitarian Left**

If we are to understand the peculiar challenge which is faced by Vendola's politics, we need to bear in mind that it is situated in the context of a “gelatinous” Left landscape, which still bears the mark of the demise of strong ideological identities. Vendola himself has been directly responsible for doing away with the remainings of the strongest of all Left identities in Italy, the communist identity, for how much to date, when asked by journalists, he continues to call himself ideally a communist. His departure, together with a number of comrades, from Rifondazione Comunista dominated by hard-line “vetero-comunisti”, stemmed to a great extent precisely from a sense of frustration for the continuing use of the term “comunista” and the hammer-and-sickle symbol in the party's communications, which Vendola and allies saw as nostalgic and self-defeating.



*Fig. 4: Party logos of Rifondazione and Sinistra, Ecologia e Liberta'*

While Vendola has considered as instrumental in the development of a New Left politics the abandonment of an ideological and identitarian baggage which seemed to have little purchase on reality, this task of demolition has so far not been accompanied by a serious attempt to construct a new coherent and positive identity for the Left. This situation is testified by the naming of the party which Vendola together with others founded in 2009, whereby the label “Sinistra, Ecologia and Liberta” reads more like a list of rather disparate values and connected identities, rather than as the name of a truly original political actor.

The unresolved complexity, made visible at the level of the party's naming is paralleled by the in conspicuity of a logo, which shies away from trying to capture figuratively the novelty of this New Left. No contemporary re-adaptation of the hammer-and-sickle “symbols of labour” concept (a computer keyboard and a waiter's tray perhaps?) and no substitute to the Green Party's smiling sun. In their place we find only a youthful looking lettering of the name of the party.

The logo of Sinistra, Ecologia e Liberta' is not exactly the type of icon which you would expect capable of firing people's enthusiasm. And in fact, probably, it would not be, if it were not for Vendola's own charisma and communicative cunning. Evidence of this is the fact that while Vendola approval ratings have topped 48% his own party, while fastly growing, is still deemed to be under 10%. This curious situation has much to say about the state of contemporary politics in Italy and about the risks facing Nichi Vendola's political project and its personalism. An important factor in the success of Vendola has been in fact the perception that he is a political maverick, who has had to fight against the party machineries of Partito Democratico, and its machiavellic mandarins, as the former prime minister Massimo D'Alema, himself also coming from Apulia. Now that Vendola has

invested so much of its political capital in the creation of a party New Left it will be interesting to see to what extent his personalist politics will be able to consolidate into a collective identity able to transcend Vendola if necessary.

As things stand in this transitional phase, full of potentials and dangers alike, it is evident that for the Italian Left Vendola's operates as something akin to what Ernesto Laclau has called an "empty signifier", in his discussion of populist politics (2005). An empty signifier is for Laclau, a signifier which is deprived of his signified, in order to become the end-point of a "chain of equivalence" between different identities and conflicts which are otherwise highly fragmented. For Laclau populism performs this creation of unity, by emphasising one identity over others as capable of representing the totality of the social demands which are not met by the status-quo. Vendola himself admitted that his politics has a populist dimension, being as he puts it an "anti-populist populism". In this case however the symbolic construction of a "people" out of an otherwise fragmented mass is obtained not by rallying them around a common strong identity, a resonant naming or symbol, but around the persona of a leader which his "spectacular performances" makes up precisely for the lack of an identity, capable by itself to act as an "empty signifier".

It is in fact only the display of Vendola's own body with his scandalous "queerness", embodied in his ear-ring, his defiant Southern Italian face, his colourful while always elegant attire, elements which make him visibly Other from the remaining "cast" of political talk-shows, which allows to lump together antagonistic identities and social demands which have not yet found a stable common ground. This over-reliance on the leadership on one person and his bodily charisma has comprehensibly raised more of an eye-brow in the Italian Left, which to a great extent continues to willow in the nostalgia for the glorious past of the Italian communist party, with its almighty party machine, its well selected cadres and "the party as the prince", as Gramsci put it. But also if we accept the reasonable idea that in a media age, it is important to have leaders with strong personalities and outstanding communicative skills, it is true that it will be difficult to extricate the construction of a new Left Party from Vendola's performative wizardry and from his own individual vagaries. Some of the limits of his political project are already becoming apparent in Vendola's overly eclectic pragmatism and in his sometimes too ready resort to media stunts, which have been criticised by social movement leader Luca Casarini<sup>6</sup>, as a symptom of "tacticism".

It is true that, as Casarini suggests, Vendola does not seem yet capable of offering a structural solution to the Italian Left in a post-ideological and post-identitarian time. But it advances at least a valid tactical solution to contrast the hegemony of Berlusconi in the realm of mediated and "spectacular" politics. However his ultimate legacy will have to be assessed not at the level of

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6 Luca Casarini's article on *il manifesto*

tactics but at the level of political strategy, gauging the extent to which his personalist populism has been capable of serving the long-term project of re-constitution of a post-communist Italian Left. This is precisely the task in which symmetrically Berlusconi has patently failed, with the risk that the political capital he has earned to the Right during his years in power might quickly disappear once the *prima donna* leaves the scene. Will Vendola's "narration" be any different?

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