

Strategies of the Political Entrepreneur

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When Silvio Berlusconi won the elections in 1994, the international press unleashed an avalanche of not particularly well-meaning commentary, while the left and the democrats expressed their own quite understandable indignation. But all this chatter threatened only to titillate the new forms of power, even in the best of cases. The truth that then had to be asserted and now has to be repeated, beyond the various electoral results, is that a critique of Berlusconi's politics is impossible without a critique of the new forms of capitalist accumulation. More generally, a critique of "communication" (of which many continue to speak, à propos of Berlusconi) is impossible without going against the grain of all the theories that, in the 1980s, were constructed precisely on the more or less explicit presupposition of the overcoming of capitalism and its laws by the various paradigms of communication.

But this is exactly the opposite of what happened. The social machine, the productive machine, the communicative machine, and the political machine are tending to become articulations of a single process: the capitalist domination of the real, of the whole of the real. The different machines all function on the same plane of immanence, on the "body without organs" of money-Capital, of which they are only "modes and attributes." The relative autonomy of the communicative machine, as we once used to say to account for its relationship with capitalism (a relative autonomy that permitted forms of despotic, and thus not specifically capitalist, subordination like "propaganda"), has given way to the complete "deterritorialization" (decoding) of the flows of communication, their semantic contents and their traditional speakers, by the logic of the market. Berlusconi's enterprise is a mechanism [*dispositivo*]¹ that actually allows us to observe how the enterprise has become the "soul" of those forms of communication that once followed indirectly from it: journalism, ("independent" or state-run) news, cinema, sports, game shows, etc.² Italy, they say, is a political laboratory, but it must immediately be added that it is a laboratory in which the forms of governability of this new capitalist configuration are being tested. In fact, in the figure of Berlusconi one can no longer distinguish the entrepreneur (who assures the production of surplus-value), the media

boss (who produces public opinion), and the politician (who organizes public space). Instead of being hierarchically arranged, these functions reciprocally presuppose one another.

Benetton and Flows

If Berlusconi continues to obtain a strong political and electoral consensus, this should not be attributed to his ownership of television networks, but to the fact that he represents in an emblematic and even material fashion the new figure of the entrepreneur that we have called the “*political entrepreneur*.”³ In other words, his electoral success is not due to a manipulation of the media, but to a real and profound complicity in a new mode of production, within which he swims like a fish in water. The fact that this new entrepreneur uses communication as a strategic mode of command and organization can only lead us to understand that we have entered into a new paradigm, in which the relationship between the economic, the social and the political is turned upside down. In order to comprehend this passage and to eliminate any misunderstanding, therefore, it is useful to refer to another Italian entrepreneurial experiment—one that, far from controlling the media, establishes itself over the control of flows: *flows of labor, flows of consumption, flows of communication, flows of desires*. We are referring to that entrepreneurial “anomaly” that bears the name Benetton.

Benetton, in fact, is a very strange entrepreneur in many ways that are inexplicable within the traditional framework of economic theory: it has no workers, and it lacks factories and distribution networks.⁴ In order to avoid confusing the mental habits of leftists too much, one could say that Benetton has established a new relation to production, distribution and consumption. For it, the extraction of surplus-value is no longer the result of the direct exploitation of labor; on the contrary, exploitation is organized by the small and medium-sized units of production, or self-exploitation is self-organized by “enterprise-individuals,” called “autonomous labor” in Italy.⁵ Surplus-value derives from the production and control of flows, *primarily financial and communicational flows*. Within this framework, a flow can be captured only by a more powerful flow. Only at the *conjunction* of different flows (of production, circulation, consumption and desire) is there production of surplus-value, and only there does this production become visible. *The function of the entrepreneur is thus to encourage the flows and capture them*. In this framework, the machine of communication, with its a-signifying and signifying flows, is an enormous mechanism for the capture of

surplus-value and not for the production of ideology. The new capitalism constitutes itself on the power of flows, on the differential of their speed of circulation, so the entrepreneur is defined by his capacity to function as a relay and multiplier of their speed of circulation.⁶

To put it another way, the production of surplus-value, the production of meaning, and the production of public space are the articulations of the work of the political entrepreneur (personified here in Benetton), which have functioned since the end of the 1970s in parallel with the forms of Fordist production, its political system and its public opinion. Over the past twenty years, this mutation in the capitalist form of accumulation has eroded both the material constitution and the formal constitution that emerged out of the Second World War. To explain the collapse of Fordism and its political system in Italy by means of scandals and corruption (which were obviously quite real!) is to mistake effects for causes.⁷

The Flows of Labor

Since we do not yet have available a working description of the machine of communication as an "apparatus of capture," I will limit myself here to offering several elementary reflections on the functioning of the multinational Benetton.

As regards "production," Benetton's principal preoccupation is not to manage it but to *federate* it,⁸ to structure the productive networks that already exist independently of it. Its relationship with the networks is political in the sense that its basic function is no longer that of organizing the "time and method" of factory labor, or establishing differentials of productivity by means of productive innovation (as did the classical entrepreneur of Schumpeter), but to ensure the "social construction of the market" within an autonomous productive fabric. The characteristics that today best identify the specific character of the enterprise's function seem to be social participation, the fluidity of networks, and the permanence of circuits. The localization of production is only of limited importance. Instead, insertion into the tertiary circuits of finance and services is decisive; insertion into the networks of communication and high technology is ultimately necessary. But here we must pay close attention: the systematic relativization of all components takes place in a temporal dimension that *traverses and occupies social space* and realizes a concrete valorization. If the factory can no longer be seen, this is not because it has disappeared but because it has been socialized, and in this

sense it has become immaterial: an immateriality that nevertheless continues to produce social relations, values, and profits.⁹

In order to understand the figure of the entrepreneur, it is necessary to use the categories of *mediation* and *legitimation* among the different actors (bank, productive unit, local collective, consumers, distributors, etc.), in place of the categories of business discipline or administrative constraint.

Networks of Commercialization

The distribution networks do not belong to Benetton either. The small units of distribution that it directly controls have only an experimental function. The distribution network is organized according to the method of *franchising*.¹⁰ In this part of the cycle we discover the very same characteristics of control and organization that we saw functioning in the industrial flows: social and political management of the networks via the "market" instead of direct disciplinary or administrative bonds. The head office offers a retailer its brand and its merchandise, which is to say an "aura," an identity, a means of producing revenue. The retailer will no longer be an anonymous retailer but a Benetton shop. In return, it will sell only Benetton merchandise, it will follow the precise rules of style and behavior, and it will do everything it can to honor the "brand." It is this name, with its enormous communicative potential, the result of billions in investment capital, that represents the source of revenue and the real principle of identity. Thus any retailer whatsoever, in its autonomy and without contradicting the sacred law of individual initiative, may become a dependent of the "big boss" and a subject of the empire.

Flow of Desire, Consumption, and the Production of Subjectivity

In relation to production and distribution, we have seen how Benetton works to set in motion "social conditions" for the development of productive and distributive networks by using political forms of mediation, legitimization and communication. We will now see it working toward the construction of a true public space and its values.

One of the most important functions exercised by the political entrepreneur in the "social construction of the market" is that of constituting the "consumer," a function that in this case is exercised by means of a very precise instrument: publicity. It is well known that Benetton, unlike the Fordist enterprise, does not delegate its publicity to outside "agencies," since it considers publicity to be a "productive factor" of the same sort as others. But in the post-Fordist enterprise, the

productivity of publicity finds its economic rationale not so much in sales as in the “production of subjectivity.”¹¹ It is the mediating form through which the “interaction” with consumers is organized, and it comes increasingly to resemble political action, since this is where the production of meaning for the market takes place—but this is a market that has the same contours as society itself. The development of Benetton’s publicity can be described via the specification of three stages, which in themselves summarize the history and the future of publicity. This development can be defined as the passage from advertising to publicity and from publicity to “social communication,” in which the root word “public” in “publicity” assumes its full signification.

Advertising belongs to the era in which publicity served above all to help *sell the product*. The commodity object as such was what triumphed—in the poster, the spot or the newspaper. We then passed on to the form of publicity that had to construct, in time, *the brand image of a product or enterprise*. Now, with the new publicity produced by Benetton (the AIDS patient, the newborn infant, the ship filled with Albanian refugees, etc.), *the commodity disappears* from the publicity and the *brand*, which remains, is confined to a corner of the publicity material.¹² The image, on the other hand, is a directly cultural, political or ethical image. What happens in this passage? As one of the major French critics of the image insists, in an analysis of Benetton publicity, “What is happening is that publicity no longer works on behalf of the market, but rather the triumphant market works on behalf of publicity. More precisely, the market acts as a pedestal for publicity because publicity gives form to [*informi*] a vast landscape to know and conquer.”¹³ More precisely still, publicity does not serve merely to provide information about markets, but to constitute them. It enters into an “interactive” relationship with the consumer, addressing itself not only to her *needs* but above all to her *desires*. It addresses itself not only to her passions and emotions, but also directly interpellates “political” rationality. It produces not just the consumer but the “individual” of immaterial capitalism. It engages in dialogue with her convictions, values, and opinions, and has the courage to interpellate her where the political fears to go. Publicity is one of the most important forms of social and political communication at this turn of the century. Publicity as such increasingly occupies “public space,” animates it, provokes it, arouses it. The enterprise produces “meaning” directly. The distinction between citizen and consumer belongs to another era, and Benetton publicity scandalizes because it tells us that we have entered the era of immaterial, “psychic,” or “spiritual” goods that abolishes the boundary between

the economic and the political. The analyses of publicity provided by Roland Barthes or Umberto Eco, based on rhetoric, are henceforth definitively obsolete.

Two further observations. Regarding the first, we must emphasize that what is demanded of citizen-consumers is genuine “labor” since the actions of the consumer (her desires and values) are directly integrated, as a creative moment, into the social network of the enterprise.¹⁴ The flows of desire are directly convened, tested, verified, and stimulated by the post-Fordist enterprise’s communication. Marketing reveals its true nature here: it constructs the product and solicits forms of subjectification. The consumer is no longer the passive mass-consumer of standardized commodities, but the active individual involved with the totality of her persona: to this end, it is necessary to “know” and solicit her ideology, lifestyle and conception of the world.¹⁵ One cannot criticize marketing from a humanist viewpoint (“politics is not the selling of a product,” the beautiful souls complain) since it is the very essence of contemporary capitalism. Capitalism is no longer the capitalism of production, but of the product. Marketing is no longer merely a technique for selling, but a mechanism that is constitutive of social relations, information and values for the market—one that integrates the techniques and “responsibility” of the political.

The second observation concerns what Godard told us a long time ago regarding television and publicity, that the distinction between information and publicity is no longer relevant. What does this mean, Serge Daney asks? “It means that the image has completely swung over to the side of economic power.” Postmodern authors have deduced from this the power of the image over the real and the capacity of signs to circulate to infinity, destroying all meaning. De-realization and “the end of history,” they tell us. In reality it involves a war machine which, like the immaterial enterprise (but can we still distinguish these things?), produces meaning. The Gulf War was the general test of the management and regulation (from one viewpoint, in one sense, and according to one strategy) of the flows of information, images, and sounds and their speed of circulation.¹⁶

If we now make up a balance sheet of the different functions that the new entrepreneur exercises, we will understand even more readily the roots of the phenomenon of delegitimization that the political is undergoing. In practice, all the political functions (the construction of the social conditions for production and the market as well as the forms of mediation between production and the social, the production of

subjectivity and the organization of public space) are assumed by business. There is no longer any autonomy possible for the social, the political or communication. They are completely subordinated to the logic of the enterprise.¹⁷ The Benetton production cycle is coextensive with the production of society, and *exploits it*.¹⁸ Social, productive and communicative relations are traversed and set to work by the political entrepreneur. The production of surplus-value and of society are tightly connected. This is the sense in which "the entrepreneur freed from the political produces the political."

The separation between the economic, as the sphere of production of a-signifying flows and structural relations with nature, and the political, as the production of signifying flows and relations with the other mediated by language, is materially in doubt.

The Political Entrepreneur and the State

Berlusconi is a political entrepreneur of the same nature as Benetton. He is the expression of new, dynamic and innovative social relations (despite the vulgarity of his imagery and the conformism of the "forms of life" that he stages) and new relations of power, and only in these things does he find his legitimacy. If we fail to consider the structural transformation that Italian society has undergone during the past twenty years, we will have no way to explain the Berlusconi "phenomenon" except as a media coup d'état. Mediaset (formerly Fininvest) is a post-Fordist enterprise that has nothing to do with "public service" television, with interwar media or even with the media of the "glorious Thirties." Commercial television is only a point of passage toward the real communicative machine of the post-Fordist assemblage, toward the *infobahn* or information superhighway, where all the functions required for the control of flows find their real technological realization. If we fail to understand this, we run the risk of saying many stupid things about the media and the power of information. The media do indeed play a fundamental role in this affair, but they are part of a completely different assemblage. In this new assemblage, we don't watch the same old television and we don't live with the same old media.¹⁹ *The post-Fordist social machine explains the nature of the media, and not vice-versa.*

Berlusconi's television is a *flow of images and sounds* directly connected to the new productive networks. It involves a *new communicative machine, fully adapted to the new machine for the production of society and to the "mutants"*²⁰ *that produce it.* The new machine of communication has functioned as the mechanism of "subjectification" for small and medium-sized post-Fordist

enterprises in Italy (but the stress should be on “post-Fordism” and not on “small and medium-sized”). It has functioned as the flywheel of the “construction of the market” for the new industrial fabric of the country. It has been the primary mechanism for the anthropological mutation of the Italian populace. This new machine, in which we can no longer distinguish political flows from productive or social flows, has functioned as the mechanism of capture for new forces and their forms of expression, leading them back to the state.

Only a machine of this type, which encourages flows, legitimates some and excludes others through its only code, that of the market (and no longer the old political machine of parties with their ideological codifications), can give strength, legitimacy and dynamism back to the State. It does not intervene a posteriori in a labor of consensus/dissent or legitimation/exclusion brought about by the political. Here, the political and communication reciprocally presuppose one another and articulate their procedures within a single systemic mechanism. The astonishing rapidity with which Berlusconi established himself on the “political” scene is not due to media manipulation, but to the capacity of communicative flows to be sufficiently deterritorialized to be able to traverse the social and immaterial dimensions of post-Fordist capitalism at the same time. The new communicative machine does not primarily produce ideology or propaganda. “Propaganda”²¹ and manipulation were names given to the subordination of the communicative machine to the political. From this point of view, the political was that which still had the capacity to hierarchize the flows and control them by means of a “despotic” coding. The political was what remained of sovereign power (sovereignty without a sovereign) as the capacity to overdetermine the coding of flows.²²

In post-Fordist capitalism, as we have seen à propos of Berlusconi, no code “external” to the logic of money-capital can overcode and integrate the relations of power. Post-Fordist capitalism requires an absolute immanence of the forms of production, constitution, regulation, legitimation and subjectification. And this is Berlusconi’s weak point, his Achilles’ heel, because he cannot coherently sustain the “absolute immanence” of the production of society that post-Fordism reveals to us as its horizon. What does Berlusconi’s electoral achievement in fact signify? It signifies that the principle of self-constitution inscribed in social activity once again refers back to an external, transcendental foundation and principle of legitimation: the power of the state. The new forms of expression that Italian society has confusedly but consistently

expressed during those years have been led back to the form of representation, to State subjectification. Whatever the capitalist machine “deterritorializes on one side, it is obliged to territorialize on the other,” and to territorialize it within and by means of the State.²³

We are probably about to witness an integration of the communicative machine into the state apparatus (and vice-versa) as well as systematic experimentation with techniques of “control”²⁴ that will give us a “new” form of state. It is certainly not by reviving comfortable phantoms from the past that we will disturb the new forms of domination and exploitation. The phantom of historical fascism has been the only “strong” image that the left has managed to produce to counter Berlusconi. This image is powerless to reveal the new forms of command and subjection. Obviously it is easier to mobilize against 300 skinheads parading around some city in the Veneto than to mobilize against the model of the political entrepreneur that is being constituted in that same region as a set of laboratory experiments. A critique of the political entrepreneur would imply a critique of the left that very few in Italy seem ready to undertake.

Translated by Timothy S. Murphy

Notes

1. The Italian term “dispositivo” is cognate with the French term “dispositif,” which readers of Michel Foucault will know has no direct equivalent in English. It refers to a complex structure composed of many different kinds of parts: material, discursive, subjective, institutional, etc. For consistency’s sake I have chosen to translate it as “mechanism” throughout this essay, but readers should bear in mind other possible translations, including “apparatus” and “assemblage.” (Translator’s note.)
2. In a well-known scene, Jean-Luc Godard showed that if one removes all the publicity (the enterprise) from a weekly newsmagazine, nothing remains except the director’s editorial (arbitrary power). As in the case of the “traditional” forms of popular communication which, as E.P. Thompson has shown, constituted an important “elsewhere” in the constitution of the working class, the linguistic flows are traversed and reorganized by the forces of the market. This means that the “elsewhere” no longer has any pre-structured “exteriority” on which one could rely once “being” is subordinated to the capital relation.
3. The definition of the “political entrepreneur” has a specific polemical value since economic theory and official politics are based precisely on the separation between the economic and the political. Analogously, in fashionable philosophies this separation is defined as the separation between “instrumental rationality” and “communicative rationality.”
4. To be more precise: in 1988, out of 250,000 people who worked for Benetton, only 2,500 were directly employed by the clothing multinational. And among these directly-employed workers, the classical type of worker (involved above all in coloring and retail) was not the most numerous. Since then, automation has certainly

affected labor in retail sales, and probably in coloring as well (but regarding this we cannot provide precise data). The new hiring, in contrast, involves the Formula 1 stable.

5. The development of this type of labor (simultaneously “material” and “immaterial” but certainly “independent”) is what characterized the 1980s in Italy.
6. In Italy the financial flows of public debt, the most deterritorialized and hence the most powerful flows, played a central role in the eighties: it was a matter of “regulating” a production that had already reached levels of immateriality unknown in other countries. The financialization of the economy cannot be a critique of the “rentier.”
7. Obviously the Fordist mode of production and its subjects have not disappeared. During the last round of elections they were represented by the “left” and the big bosses allied under the very same label of “progressives” and “center-left.” The point is that, as always, the capitalist mode of production is a set of different modes of production that is commanded by the most dynamic and deterritorialized mode.
8. The “federalism” of the Lega Nord finds its structural rationale for existence in the “autonomy” of these networks.
9. For an in-depth analysis of Benetton as an enterprise, see Lazzarato, Yann Moulier-Boutang, Antonio Negri, and Giancarlo Santilli, *Des entreprises pas comme les autres: Benetton en Italie, le Sentier à Paris* (Paris: Publisud, 1993).
10. English in original. (Translator’s note.)
11. As we have already had the chance to observe with regard to immaterial production, this means that the “production of subjectivity” has become one of the conditions that must be realized in order to be able to sell.
12. This form of publicity is not opposed to other forms, but integrates them.
13. Serge Daney in *Libération*, 1 October, 1991. These two articles appeared in response to the release of a Benetton ad showing a newborn baby with its umbilical cord not yet cut. It is interesting to note how such a specialist in images arrives at similar conclusions to ours regarding the strategic and constitutive role of communication.
14. “The self-regulation of the social and free-wheeling interactivity are services that publicity (grown large) provides to the market economy (grown even larger) and to these wars of the third kind. It is a free service, carried out in the eye and for the eye” (Serge Daney).
15. Benetton’s strategy “does not consist, for example, in the simple representation of an ideological line (the clear anti-racism of *United Colors*) that corresponds to the firm convictions of Luciano himself. It resides instead in the search for a subtle line of dissent, a limit that is internal to collective convictions (and conventions). With the help of small provocative details, it sets out in search of more precise information regarding ideology—no longer the doctrinaire and molar ideology that no longer sells, but the ‘lived experience of ideology,’ its vague inside, its changing traces, its easy contradictions” (Serge Daney).
16. We must not confuse, as Virilio does, the technological machine (with its proto-subjectivity, its ontological consistency, and its own alterity) with the abstract machine that establishes itself transversally and connects the machinic levels in an “event-like [*evenemenziale*]” way. Abstract machines are occurrences [*avvenimenti*] (“*Desert Storm*”) or names (“Berlusconi”).
17. “Modern societies undoubtedly needed to have their four truths come from an elsewhere that was within them: the sacred, poetry, art, even war. Politics and ideology successively occupied this ‘other place’ that Bataille calls ‘the accursed share,’ the singular economy of which he sought to study. And in postmodern society, it is indubitable that the conquering plasticity of the market no longer needs to have anything to do with *that exteriority* [my emphasis], and possesses, by means of publicity that has become social communication, the means to subject society to its own logic” (Serge Daney).

18. Exploitation is also redefined since, as we have noted, it involves the exploitation of the productive autonomy of independent networks and the processes of subjectivation and individuation.
19. We must be attentive and not dismiss Berlusconi's television with a presumptuous smile, because it has constructed an "image," a "style," a "sensibility" (with game shows, sports, publicity) for the "individual" of post-Fordism. What could an "other" image be? Certainly not one of public service. "Creating an image" is one of the major political problems of post-Fordism.
20. In the 1970s, Pasolini's analysis of the anthropological impact of television and publicity on the Italian populace anticipated a phenomenon that would find its complete realization in Berlusconi's communicative machine.
21. For more than a decade, Berlusconi's television has been a TV of commodities and enterprises, rather than a TV of information: it has functioned on the basis of publicity, game shows and sports. Game shows and sports have become, via television, moments that are constitutive of the ethics of the enterprise. Even when it is authorized (or rather obligated) to broadcast news programs, its ratings have always been lower than those of the public service networks, which are strictly controlled by the parties of the old political system.
22. The same can be said regarding the production of subjectivity. The cinema, as "mass art," already intended to "open minds," but that subjectivation was "overcoded" by the political. The comparison with historical fascism or even with "state" overcoding after the Second World War does not account for the great change introduced by the directly capitalist subordination of the communicative flows.
23. The same holds true for subjectivity. The communicative machine must refer the deterritorialization of old forms of subjectivity and identity back to the family and to normality.
24. In the sense that Gilles Deleuze defines it, that is, as the overcoming of "disciplinary" techniques.