



Stanton H. Burnett, Luca Mantovani. *The Italian Guillotine: Operation Clean Hands and the Overthrow of Italy's First Republic.* Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1998. xii + 332 pp. \$90.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8476-8877-7.

Reviewed by Stanislao G. Pugliese

Published on H-Italy (September, 1999)

Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger once confessed that although he could decipher the obscure workings of the Kremlin, Italian politics left him completely confused. In 1992, American scholars and the general public watched in shock and dismay as an unfolding corruption scandal rocked Italy and brought down an entire political class. Beginning with a petty kickback in Milan, the investigation uncovered a network of corruption so vast it was immediately dubbed "Tangentopoli" or "Kickback City." It soon became apparent that the major political parties, especially the Christian Democrats and the Socialists, had colluded in illegal party financing. By accepting, and indeed, demanding, bribes and kickbacks for lucrative state contracts, the political parties had effectively divided the spoils of state patronage amongst themselves. The investigation, led by a group of politically committed magistrates in Milan, was named "Mani Puliti" or "Clean Hands." Politicians who had governed Italy for decades fell from power while wealthy businessmen saw their economic empires collapse. Two-thirds of the Italian Parliament stood accused of corruption and at least thirty people committed suicide in disgrace (some under unusual circumstances).

"The Italian Guillotine" is a controversial book that argues against the prevailing consensus that the magistrates of "Mani Puliti" were idealists purging Italy of a cancerous growth on the body

politic and in doing so were responsible for bringing about an "Italian Revolution" and the end of the "First Republic." The magistrates often compared themselves to protagonists of the French Revolution and the reader may see shades of both Rousseau's nebulous "general will" as well as Robespierre's dangerous "Republic of Virtue" in the workings of the pool. Burnett and Mantovani argue that the Milan "pool" of magistrates were crafty and insidious zealots, radicalized by their participation in Italian politics of the 1970s. Here, the magistrates are not idealists striving for justice nor were they out to rid Italy of a corrupt ruling class, but rather they were consciously effecting a "postmodern coup d'etat." That coup ended with the electoral victory of the Left on 21 April 1996, an electoral victory that the authors contend would not have been possible without the preceding coup. For all its "postmodern" character, the authors also paint the coup in more traditional (and dramatic) terms as "a courtier plunging a knife into the back of the king" (p. 1). Having failed to bring revolutionary change through the PCI (Italian Communist Party) or its successor the PDS (Democratic Party of the Left), these magistrates usurped political power through several peculiar Italian judicial conventions.

Italian magistrates are not just judges but prosecutors as well. They have the power to issue an "avviso di garanzia" which theoretically guar-

antees the rights of an individual who is to come under investigation. Burnett and Mantovani clearly and consistently document how the "avviso di garanzia" was abused: by law it was supposed to be issued confidentially, but they were instead leaked to the press and the information was printed in daily newspapers, leading citizens to assume a person's guilt.

While the authors take great pains to state (more than once) that they have no sympathy for the corrupt ruling class, there is a fundamental flaw in the work: the statements of the accused and their protestations of innocence are taken at face value while the statements of the magistrates are always read as self-serving, duplicitous, or simply out-and-out lies. The accused are accorded every courtesy while the magistrates, especially Borselli and Di Piero, are ruthlessly criticized. The latter, from a poor southern family, is several times described with the Homeric epitaph "swarthy" (pp. 4, 64, 118).

For Burnett and Mantovani, Italian justice is (to paraphrase Clausewitz) politics by other means. But they fail to admit that their book is itself politics by other means: Stanton H. Burnett was a former counselor for public affairs at the U.S. embassy in Rome and is now a senior advisor at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C.; his co-author, Luca Mantovani, is chief of the "Forza Italia" Press Office in the Chamber of Deputies, one of the two houses of the Italian Parliament. "Forza Italia" is a political party created by the media magnate Silvio Berlusconi in 1994 as he saw the unfolding corruption scandal offering a golden political opportunity. With the collapse of the traditional parties, the political spectrum opened for the first time in five decades. Berlusconi, known at the time to most Italians as the owner of the phenomenally-successful A.C. Milan soccer club, converted his team's popularity into a political force through the transformation of local soccer clubs into political cells (a fact not mentioned in the book).

Berlusconi is a curious political animal—implicated in the enormous corruption of the First Republic but successfully marketing himself as an outsider, the knight in shining armor come to rescue the damsel Italy from the black knight (night) of communism. Indeed, listening to Berlusconi's public speeches and pronouncements, one would never know that the Berlin Wall has come down, the Soviet Union has imploded, and that the Italian Communist Party long ago accepted the democratic "rules of the game." Berlusconi rode his team's popularity and the last of the Cold War's rhetorical waves to power in 1994, a temporary setback to the coup that was quickly corrected when Berlusconi himself received an "avviso di garanzia." The conflict of interest is most pronounced in the treatment of Berlusconi: unlike the rest of the press, tied to the great industrialists and calling for blood, his media empire, the authors contend, had "notable independence and variety-of-view" (p. 57). No mention is made of the fact that when Berlusconi became prime minister, one of his first debacles was an attempt to add the three state-owned television stations to his privately owned flock of three and thereby hold a virtual monopoly over Italian television in addition to his radio and publishing enterprises. This leads the authors into an unresolvable contradiction: on the one hand, Berlusconi "was a genuinely successful showman. He needed no help ..." and yet on the same page the authors admit that "there is no reason to think" that Berlusconi achieved his financial success "in a manner different from that of other Italian entrepreneurs" (p. 160).

The authors assume that because the PCI/PDS was not initially targeted and profited most from the judicial investigations, the investigations were themselves politically motivated and suspect. Many observers (political scientists, journalists, historians) have argued that the communists escaped relatively well because they were "out of the loop," so to speak; not being in power they were not in a position to award contracts so cor-

rupt businessmen did not seek them out, but Italian communists and their successors have won election to and administered some of the most economically advanced and least corrupt provinces in Italy, especially around the "red belt" of Bologna. There (until a recent election which brought a center-right coalition to power for the first time since the end of the Second World War), "red" administrations created efficient, honest, and capable governments.

The authors perform a valuable service in detailing the abuses of the judicial system for political ends, but this is not something new. Like Claude Rains's police inspector in *Casablanca*, they are "shocked" at this abuse. "Avvisi di garanzia" were leaked to the press and people were held indefinitely in preventive detention with the goal of breaking their resistance and forcing them to "name names." People were considered guilty until they proved their innocence; very few actually came to trial. The authors charge that this was a conscious policy of the judges: the issuing of the "avviso di garanzia" and the leaking of that information to the press was enough to politically destroy a man--a trial was not necessary or even advisable.

There are other problems as well. There is some repetition that could have been avoided in the editing process. The authors declare that "we must guard against guilt by association" in identifying magistrates and their association with a radical group, the "Magistratura Democratica," but then proceed to do just that. The twenty-seven (or thirty-three--cases were ambiguous) suicides are depicted as innocent men driven to their tragic fate by an implacable and merciless judiciary. It is assumed that the judges had a "hierarchy" of political enemies they wanted to destroy, beginning with Socialist leader Bettino Craxi and then the Christian Democrats, and that they were "soft" on their friends in the PCI/PDS. It never crosses their minds that perhaps the Socialists and the DC were the most corrupt and therefore deserved the spe-

cial scrutiny. As the authors admit, unlike the Christian Democrats and Socialists, the communist leaders "never enriched themselves personally" (p. 143). The accusations are often prefaced by qualifications ("beyond the current evidence," "cannot yet be further determined," "the evidence ... does not really permit a judgement") that are honest yet weaken the central argument that the communists and their political heirs staged a coup to inherit what they could not win at the ballot.

The Italian Guillotine is necessary in stimulating debate over what exactly has transpired in Italy during the 1990s and in offering a different point of view. An eighteen-page chronology and a thirty-one page "cast of characters" (and what characters they are!--enough to stock several operas) are both useful. Winner of the 1998 National Silone Prize, *The Italian Guillotine* is an important yet flawed work.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-italy>

Citation: Stanislao G. Pugliese. Review of Burnett, Stanton H.; Mantovani, Luca. *The Italian Guillotine: Operation Clean Hands and the Overthrow of Italy's First Republic*. H-Italy, H-Net Reviews. September, 1999.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3453>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.