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NEW PERSPECTIVES REPORT

Trump: Just a Berlusconi?

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Abstract

Berlusconi and Trump share many analogies, but perhaps the most cogent of them is their ability to master new media. They are both ubiquitous on television while Trump also rides the social media wave. Their success reflects and reinforces a new mediatic paradigm: the Digisphere. They are not notable as individuals in themselves but as simulacra of what may become a long procession of future political leaders.

Keywords

Donald Trump; Silvio Berlusconi; media; Regis Debray; digisphere

Is Donald Trump just a clone of Silvio Berlusconi? The initial evidence is compelling, but not in the way many may have imagined. It is true that both manage businesses that are concerned with images and their manipulation for public effect: Berlusconi runs a media empire spanning television as well as newspapers and holds a near monopoly of television advertising in his country. Likewise Trump's empire is fundamentally a giant branding exercise. To many it might appear coincidental that both men's rise has been propelled by their investment in media using profits derived from real-estate speculation. I do not think that it is a coincidence as I will explain.

The popularity of both men is also similar: their larger than life public personae are centred on the 'powerful white male in a tailored suit' cliché garnished with alpha chauvinism and marinated in porcine sexual proclivities. This image, rather than damage their respective lunges at political power, has actually helped their respective political careers. In both Italy and the USA, their success has occasioned extensive head-scratching, hand wringing and vociferous indignation, particularly among those aligned to the left of the political spectrum.

However, we can look at this contradiction from a different angle by asking these two questions: what do their success, celebrity or indeed notoriety, say about the mediatic soup these oversized fish are swimming in? What is their aquatic imaginarity? The answer: a media culture where powerful white males in tailored suits are current and largely acceptable to varying degrees and shades. Not surprisingly, it is among an audience of heterosexual men and others who identify with the values expressed by this male image that their support is largely centred. These two epigones of male aspiration are surfing on a wave that is much larger than they could ever be. In this sense they are simulacra of each other: two more exemplars from a seemingly endless procession of reproducible signifiers, so much so that they appear identical even to the detail of their respective casting seams: their hairstyles. Their strength lies not in their uniqueness, but in the fact that they can be reproduced *ad nauseam*.

Indeed, in some obscure atavistic way both Trump and Berlusconi have understood that this very quality is the path to fame and power, well worth sinking their massive real-estate profits to attain. After all, real-estate speculation is an excellent primer for a media career, as both sectors derive their appeal from appearance and aspiration rather than rational consideration.

So, where does all this leave us?

A partial primer for a response is the model conceptualised and published in 1993 under the title *L'État séducteur: Les révolutions médiologiques du pouvoir* by Régis Debray, French media analyst and erstwhile journalist. This model anticipated the arrival of politicians of the calibre of Berlusconi and Trump by dividing human history into three eras each dominated by a communication paradigm: the logosphere, pertaining to the spoken word, which dominated Feudal Europe; the graphosphere connoting the printed word spanning the passage from absolute monarchies to the popular democracies, and the videosphere, which characterises the current era. Each of these paradigms determines the direction of social, political, economic and cultural forces akin to a hub moving an array of spokes ultimately powering the turning rim of change.

Most of the handwringing traditional left is motivated by nostalgia for the graphosphere, an epoch dominated by the logical sequence of reasoned, sustained and exalted thought. It was in this period that politicians sought out the company of grey bearded luminaries and (mainly) male intellectuals to sustain their reputations and their political legitimacy. These halcyon days are now over, replaced by the videosphere where what counts above all is entertainment. The politicians of our time seek out the company of the fashionable, the beautiful visual image or

even the grotesque, in a word, the celebrated. It is with the mediatic currency of celebrity that our latter day leaders pay for the public's disattention and hold onto it.

Were we to go beyond Debray and theorise the next era beyond the videosphere, calling it the 'Digisphere,' we would characterise it as a period of increasingly fast circulation of imagery in all its forms, across multiple digital devices. In a manner akin to electronic commerce, the greater the speed of circulation, the faster the accumulation of social and political currency. It has long since ceased to matter what triggers this obsessive and constantly increasing circulation of images, because the vast audience (now no longer a public), has long ceased to reflect or to think, preferring surrender to the eye glazing procession of visual stimuli. It matters little whether Trump, Berlusconi or their epigones win, for the digital media that supports them has already taken over our thoughts, our emotions and ultimately our lives. As the multiple social media platforms that sustain our contemporary personalities indicate, whether they be Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, Tinder or Grindr, we have become clones of these politicians we are so driven to decry.

Reference

Debray, R. 1993, *L'État séducteur. Les révolutions médiologiques du pouvoir*. Gallimard, Paris.