

## DRAFT

The final version was published as follows:

Archetti, C. (2010) Review of Gianpietro Mazzoleni and Anna Sfardini, *Politica Pop: Da “Porta a Porta” a l’ “Isola dei Famosi”* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2010), *Bulletin of Italian Politics* 2(1): 196-198.

Gianpietro Mazzoleni and Anna Sfardini, *Politica Pop: Da “Porta a Porta” a “L’Isola dei Famosi”*, Bologna: Il Mulino, 2010. €14.00, pp.182, ISBN 978-88-15-13273-4.

*Politica Pop* examines the conundrum of politics, media, and popular culture in the Italian context since the beginning of the 1990s. It particularly analyzes the way in which TV has changed the nature of political processes and how political actors have both adapted to the logic of the visual medium and attempted to manipulate it in order to pursue their own agendas.

The phenomenon of the “popularization of politics”—or *infotainment*—is nothing new and, as already witnessed in the US or the UK over several decades, it has simply expanded the terrain of the political competition from the halls of stately palaces to the TV studios of celebrity entertainers and the living rooms of the broader audience. In a field of study like Political Communication, which is largely dominated by Anglo-Saxon research, the major contribution of the book consists in adding nuance and depth to our understanding of political processes by exploring the unique characteristics of the Italian *infotainment* or, as the authors put it, ‘the Italian way to pop politics.’

Apart from the scholarly merits, the book further contributes to dispelling two widespread views of *infotainment*. The first is the negativity surrounding the association of politics and entertainment. The idea is that politics is a serious matter and that, if it wants to retain its credibility, it should keep well away from the showbiz. Indeed, as the authors point out, there are still people who are ‘horrified’ (“*scandalizzati*”) at the mention of ‘politica-spettacolo’. In this respect the analysis demonstrates that pop politics is not a corrupted form of politics, rather its ordinary practice in a mediatized society and age. The second contribution consists in challenging commonly held assumptions about *infotainment*. If the reader was asked to identify, in his or her opinion, what causes the phenomenon, three would be the most likely answers. To put them very crudely, one reply could be “blame the media”: the fierce struggle for viewers’ ratings in a highly competitive media market causes a “dumbing down” and trivialization of political issues. The second could be “blame the politicians”: in order to win the popularity contest political actors turn themselves into celebrities ready to feed the 24/7 media machine with personal details about their private lives. The third could read “blame the public”: both journalists and politicians adapt to the demands of the masses, particularly their insatiable taste for gossip and entertainment. The book shows that each of these answers, albeit containing some elements of truth, is inadequate. Instead, it takes the reader on a systematic analytical journey to show the complex relationships between political actors, journalists, and politically active—in ways that do vary from individual to individual—audiences.

The journey is divided into six chapters. It opens with an introductory discussion of the way politics and popular culture have met through television. It includes examples of the way politicians have famously appropriated the visual medium—among them the appearance of British MP George Galloway on *Celebrity Big Brother*. The second

chapter shifts the analytical lens towards the Italian case. It explains how the combination of the TV market structure in the country, typically Italian media consumption habits, and sociological attitudes towards the TV medium have led to a blurring of the boundaries between the public and the private spheres. Chapter three makes the point that the history of the country ‘has been co-written by both politicians and journalists, parties and media, in a crescendo of relationships and degrees of intensity rarely observable in other mature democracies’ (p. 55). It shows the way in which the mutual dependency between media and political actors has evolved over time, shaped by structural changes in the “rules of the game” beyond the personal relationships between journalists and politicians (when their roles have not merged altogether). For example, the chapter illustrates how the introduction of the first-past-the post system has changed the nature of political campaigning by emphasizing the role of single candidates, thereby leading to a “personalization” of politics. The 2000 *par condicio* law that abolished political advertisement (to prevent Berlusconi from using his own TV channels unlimitedly) also led politicians to migrate from the ‘defunct political spot’ to alternative TV venues, such as talk shows. The Berlusconi phenomenon, in this perspective, is both an outcome and an exemplification of the media logic affecting the way a politician presents himself to his audience, but also of the party logic enveloping the whole media system. Chapter four moves on to describing the formats of political entertainment—or *politainment*. The term refers both to the presence on TV of the entertaining aspects of politics—the gossip about the couple Sarkozy-Bruni for instance—and the presence of politics within popular culture programmes, such as the participation of politicians to the satirical *Le Iene* (watch, for example, Massimo D’Alema and Giulio Tremonti in one of the programme’s iconic “double interview” in February 2005: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=py8IaxuU70M>). Chapter five discusses the impact of *infotainment* and *politainment* on political participation and citizenship. These aspects are empirically explored in chapter six, where viewing ratings and profiles of audiences who regularly watch *info/politainment* programmes are integrated with evidence from focus groups. The discussion reveals that the idea of a correlation between the consumption of *info/politainment* programmes and low interest in politics is simplistic, if not wrong. The Italian viewer-citizen (*‘cittadino-spettatore’*), on the contrary, regardless of the level of interest in politics, tends to be well-informed, aware of the political “offer” on TV, and able to discern the programmes that meet his/her interests, values, and needs. Indeed, rather than a possible threat to democracy and civic engagement, the TV political entertainment formats are described as the ‘new milieu of the postmodern political participation’ (p.136).

The book is a valuable addition to the understanding of an increasingly important dimension of Italian politics. It is easily and very quickly readable, as well as accessible also to a readership of non-specialists of Italian politics. It contains an Appendix with the description of 25 pop-political programmes, their focus, and audience profiles, too. While readers who have not lived in Italy may not be familiar with them, excerpts of the programmes, both past and more current, are easily available on YouTube. The book, for example, mentions the famous TV appearance of D’Alema, then president of the Commissione Bicamerale for the institutional reforms, filmed while cooking risotto during the programme *Porta a Porta* in October 1997 (p. 73). Unfortunately the original clip does not seem to be available online, but the appearance did capture the imagination of the public, as it can be seen in the 1998

spoof by comedian Sabina Guzzanti (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=081CeRDfHaA>). This is just another small demonstration of the fact that *infotainment* is not just about either the trivialization of politics or the exploitation of the visual medium by politicians to manipulate the audience. *Infotainment* is creative and constitutes an important forum for comment, reflection, satirical critique, airing of alternative ideas and, ultimately, political participation.

Cristina Archetti  
University of Salford