Salvatore Giusto
University of Toronto

Through the Looking Glass: Televised Politics in Contemporary Populist Italy

This article evaluates the role of political mediation played by national and local television networks within the social peripheries of Naples, Southern Italy. In the context of contemporary Italian populism, the management of this medium by simultaneously public and private —as well as formal and informal— power-holders, such as the neoliberal state and the Camorra (a powerful criminal organization) have increasingly replaced civil society's historical role of mediation between centers and peripheries. The direct participation of the subaltern in the production and circulation of explicitly populist televised content is now strongly promoted and yet informally monitored by the Italian state authorities. The regimes of media production and social representation emerging from these mediatic processes have not triggered crises of cultural hegemony—exercised by the Italian neoliberal "establishment" over the lower classes—but instead furthered the sovereignty of the state and amplified its ability to arouse the political imaginary of both its most marginalized citizens and "middle-class" cultural operators. Simultaneously, however, these regimes have also spawned new modes of socioeconomic mobility and forms of "political society," which reproduce the mediacratic features of Italian state power among a plethora of local informal agencies, including ostensible "public enemies" such as the Camorra. [populism, neoliberalism, media, organized crime, class, informal politics, Italy]

The Curious Case of Ernesto the Tailor

I conducted fieldwork research in Naples, Southern Italy, for the better part of 2015. In that occasion, I used to live in the Pignasecca. This popular neighborhood connected the upscale touristic promenade of Via Toledo with the Quartieri Spagnoli, a lower-class urban area. Consequently, the Pignasecca included both a street market providing the Quartieri Spagnoli with basic commodities and high-end shops attracting upper-class strollers via the promenade. It was here that I was once stopped by Ernesto,[1] the lower-middle-class owner of a local tailor's shop. Since Ernesto had spotted me interviewing people, he presumed that I was a TV journalist. He therefore tried to get my attention to be invited to talk about "his case" on TV; that is, as he insistently reminded me, "Something you can possibly watch on those infotainment TV shows, where music and gags are intermixed with real-life stories by men of the people like myself!"

Ernesto informed me that there was a harsh dispute between the Pignasecca shop owners and the Camorra, a Neapolitan criminal organization. According to the tailor, the municipality of Naples had recently allowed car traffic along the alley where his shop was located. The goal of the public authorities was to promote the commerce of the shop owners over that of the street vendors. Shop owners like Ernesto were now thriving because of the new access to the alley by wealthy newcomers, who drove to their favorite stores. The street vendors, however, were disturbed by the cumbersome presence of cars in the alley, since most of their clientele were local lower-class pedestrians. This friction between shop

PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review, Vol. 00, Number 0, pp. 1–16. ISSN 1081-6976, electronic ISSN 1555-2934. DOI: 10.1111/plar.12342.

owners and street vendors was further complicated because most street vendors were unregistered traders. Unlike the shop owners, they mostly avoided paying taxes to the local municipality. Their interests were generally backed by the Camorra, to whom they paid a monthly racket-fee based on an inextricable mix of economic need and violent coercion.

When the municipality promulgated the new car permit, some mobsters placed large planters at both ends of the alley where Ernesto's shop was located to impede car access. A few shop owners (including Ernesto) moved the planters but the Camorra gangsters returned to verbally insult and physically beat them. Ernesto told me that he felt humiliated and impotent. However, he believed that reporting this attack to the police was a monumental waste of time. In his view, the local police officers were too scared to challenge organized crime. Only the public opinion of an indignant TV audience could persuade the cops to quickly intervene in the alley and force the Camorra to keep a low profile in the area.

I promptly informed Ernesto that I did not work in TV, but he stubbornly refused to believe me. He even offered me "under-the-table" money if I put him in touch with "whoever was in charge" of my TV show's castings. After twenty minutes, I finally convinced Ernesto of my real profession, which is as a social scientist. I then suggested that he forward his request to a real TV network via official channels. He replied:

> I tried official channels, but they simply do not work! Italian television is ruled by politicians and sponsors, who select who goes on-air according to their personal whims. If you are not part of that media elite, you can only cultivate informal connections with them. If they find you worthy of attention, you may get your chance to go on TV.

In short, Ernesto believed that a "man of the people," as he called himself, could negotiate improved life conditions over organized crime only through the informal patronage of the national television media elite, who had the power to publicly expose his case.

This article examines how Italian television has come to be understood as a vehicle for political patronage and personal mobility, and how this shift relates to populist forms of neoliberal governmentality in contemporary Italy. It explores how these new appeals to televised mediation (re)produce sociopolitical centers and peripheries, together with the Italian citizens' capacity to act politically vis-à-vis state power and organized crime. The "mediatization" of Italian politics has fostered a renegotiation of the historical equilibria between civil society, subaltern peripheries, organized crime, and state power at least since the mid-1990s. Ultimately, I argue, Italian television has increasingly replaced civil society's historical role of sociopolitical mediation with forms of political action in which the subaltern participates directly in the production and circulation of populist cultural productions, all while legitimizing "off-screen" hegemonic dynamics of asymmetrical patronage and informal mobility. Far from reflecting a merely Italian attitude toward the mediatization of politics, moreover, I claim that current Neapolitan televised politics can be fully understood as a local reflection of the increasing diffusion of populist discourses within global contexts of neoliberal governmentality.

Interpreting the engagement of nonelites like Ernesto with these "mediacratic" dynamics of patronage thus requires an understanding of the historical role played by the state in Southern Italy. After tracking Italian processes of so-called capitalist modernization, Gramsci ([1930] 2006) argued that the national bourgeoisie reduced the southern part of the country to an "exploitable colony" through state compliance and the processes of cultural production it managed since the political unification of Italy in 1861 (3). The proverbial backwardness of the Italian south is therefore not rooted in the "amoral familism" of local

criminal organizations such as the Camorra, as opposed to the "civilizing" logics of the central state (Banfield [1958] 1967). It is engendered by state power itself, through the mediation of "civil society": a state-sponsored middle class of bureaucrats and cultural operators (Gramsci [1930] 2006, 13). Other critical theorists departed from Gramsci's definition of civil society, showing the potential disenfranchisement of "middle-class" public operators from capitalist logics of governance (Habermas 1992), as well as their subalternity to postcolonial discourses that partially transcend the state-regulated public sphere (Spivak 1988). Nevertheless, this article employs Gramsci's definition of civil society because of its relevance to the aforementioned sociopolitical transformations involving the Italian public sphere, as well as the crucial historical impact that the Gramscian "Southern Question" had on the formation of Italian media operators and public intellectuals at least since the end of World War II (Schneider 1998). Under the influence of quite "Orientalizing" Italian middle-class discourses on Southern Italian society, in fact, the state has historically catalyzed the divide between the north and the south and between hegemonic and subaltern subjects living in both areas (Schneider 1998).

These processes have done more than prevent the Southern Italian poor from overcoming their enduring conditions of socio-economic marginality. As Rakopoulos (2017) points out, they have also engendered "a history of intricate connivance and class alliances" between southern criminal organizations and sectors of the local population — including elements of civil society (115). With little effective public administration and few job opportunities, criminal organizations have provided Southern Italians with labor and services through asymmetrical patronages regulated by both violence and political consent (Rakopoulos 2017).

In this historical context, southern Italian civil society has often played a quite ambiguous role. As documented by Schneider and Schneider (2003), on the one hand, its members have mobilized discourses of "honest democratic government" at least since the 1970s due to their direct involvement in public bureaucracies and state-regulated media outlets (300). On the other hand, they have often participated in extra-legal patronage relations (Pine 2012, 9), turning Italian gangsterism into a "contact zone" in which, as described by Ben-Yehoyada (2018, 360), licit and illicit capitals, affects, and imaginaries merged into de facto legitimated political economies.

Yet this set of relations, I argue, has shifted since the mid-1990s with the emergence of populist modalities of cultural production and social representation. In following the neoliberal reforms of the Italian mediascape in that decade, new modalities of media production allowed upper-class media owners and sponsors, middle-class media operators, and lower-class audiences to share similar populist imaginaries and political strategies of socioeconomic advancement, which reproduced the hegemony of the media owners and sponsors over their operators and audiences (Himpele 2002, 313). Simultaneously, the Italian media owners and sponsors have transformed previously bureaucratic interactions between civil society and the state into a "processual" field of informal relationality (Schiller 2013, 541). Thus, the current Italian media operators' experiences of state power are not influenced by their ability to independently manage bureaucratized mediations between the state itself and the lower classes via the strategic circulation of public discourses. They are instead informed by these media operators' capacity to reproduce populist rhetorics emerging from the "collusion between the political establishment and formidable private media corporations," while granting the Italian subaltern with informal "access to meaningful participation in media production and broader politics" (Schiller 2013, 541).

Much of the scholarship on the political facets of contemporary media production suggests that the "fundamentalist populism" (Žižek 2009, 5) that characterizes the "media

takeover of late-liberal politics" (Molé 2013, 290) engenders neoliberal models of indirect governmentality. This, in turn, jeopardizes most historical forms of social citizenry (Muehlebach 2012). These models are founded on consumer-based dynamics of political mediation, that is "processes linking opposed social formations across qualitative, spatial or temporal gaps" (Eisenlhor 2009, 274) via their supposedly free access to various private markets, including that of mass media (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001, 303). In so doing, neoliberal models of mediacratic governmentality interlock the political interests of the contemporary capitalist social "elites" with indirectly monitored lower-class dynamics of cultural production (Benjamin [1935] 1969), regimes of social representation (Hall 1997), and overall personal experiences of state power (Abu-Lughod 2004; Anderson 1983). By the same token, such models instantiate affectively imbued choreographies of power amid various classes of subaltern subjects (Aretxaga 2000), which regulate and legitimize their unequal access to common infrastructures of social communication while reproducing the hegemony of media owners and sponsors over their lives (Larkin 2008). Nevertheless, this article will not address the relation between neoliberal media politics and subaltern publicity only in terms of top-down power management. It will instead show that televised politics such as those currently circulating in Naples can be employed as effective hegemonic tools by various (legitimate or criminal) capitalist social elites precisely because they contextually enable the engagement of the lower classes with apparently self-rewarding forms of political agency.

According to Laclau (2005, 68), populism is a modality of political communication through which eclectic subaltern voices perform as a collective social body (e.g., "the people") by virtue of their supposedly irreducible common antagonism against more or less imagined external social formations (including the so-called establishment). Contemporary populism emerges from neoliberal states' incapacity to acknowledge the dynamics of class struggle implicitly illustrating democratic politics (Mouffe 2018, 5), which they attempt to resolve through the increasing eviction of the subaltern from institutionalized forms of mobilization and collective engagement with the public sphere (14). Nevertheless, the media industries also play a pivotal role in forming both populist discourses and neoliberal imaginaries of lower-class mobility. Essentialist media representations of the "neoliberal precariat" (Molé 2011), for example, contributed to engender ethnocentric subjectivities and fast-capitalist forms of consumer-based agency in various Western European and North American contexts over the last decades (Gusterson 2017; Hall 1997; Holmes 2000). This article shows how populist politics, such as those regulating the mobility of the Neapolitan subaltern via the media, do not per se entail antagonistic relations between the higher and lower classes or between legal and illegal institutions (such as the Camorra and the Italian state). While excluding civil society from expressing agency over cultural productions, Neapolitan hegemonic and subaltern subjects share economic and affective bonds with each other, while participating in similarly populist forms of "political society" vis-à-vis legal and illegal neoliberal institutions (Chatterjee 2004). They do so through their informal engagement with political processes of televised mediation, which are self-exploitative in nature but also interpreted as strategically convenient by their own participants.

On-Air Ethnography

Ernesto's political attitude toward television was not idiosyncratic. It was shared by several other people I met in Naples, a city where the Camorra owns or indirectly manages most local TV networks (De Pascale 2012). The criminal organization sponsors televisual shows that promote local lower-class entertainers in neomelodic music: a blockbusting pop-folk genre depicting the daily experiences of the Neapolitan poor with a remarkable preference

for those involved in organized crime activities (Giusto 2019; Pine 2012). Local television networks allow the Camorra to engage with the Neapolitan periphery as a popular cultural producer (Gambetta 2009). The Camorra thus informally mediate the Neapolitan lower classes' access to profitable careers in the local media industries while garnering their political consent (Rakopoulos 2017; Schneider and Schneider 2003, 233).

Ernesto's competitors, the Pignasecca street vendors, also shared an interest in the possibilities of economic advancement through television. It turned out that not only were they fans of national and local television shows. They also had personal ties with the neomelodic celebrities living in the Quartieri Spagnoli, to whom they introduced me. It emerged that most of these people had been unemployed or working for the Camorra before starting their careers in television. Moreover, these neomelodic celebrities regularly described their participation in the local telescape as an empowering tool, which improved the precarious life conditions defining their collective identity as members of the "*popolino napoletano*" [Neapolitan little people] versus the apparently inaccessible Italian state-regulated job market. Like Ernesto, in short, they envisioned their socioeconomic advancement and personal security as feasible only through their presence on television.

I confirmed this impression when a local neomelodic singer invited me to join a television show on which he was performing. The show was produced by a Camorra-managed local network called Canale Sole [Sun Channel]. It was a neomelodic event in which twelve Neapolitan singers performed in front of their fans. According to Corrado, the manager of the network, the show targeted an audience composed of local lower-class women. When I asked the manager how it felt to compete for this local public against national state-regulated television, he roared at me:

> Who cares about national television? Look at how many handsome singers we have! This is the authentic Neapolitan stuff that those national TV dandies overlook! We are the public voice of the popolino napoletano, because we personally know the tastes, needs, and ambitions of each of our viewers; [he smiles] almost one by one. Nobody can challenge this type of knowledge, not even the state!

About seventy women of various ages were on the set, surrounded by colorful lights and cameras. On the stage, a dozen male singers waited their turn to lip-synch to prerecorded songs. The fans were excited to watch these neomelodic celebrities and dance with them. Such women yelled the singers' names at the top of their lungs; challenged each other to hug, touch, and even French kiss the singers on the stage; and constantly watched the camera operators. Indeed, the fans were competing both to share intimacies with their idols and, perhaps more importantly, to be caught on camera while doing so. When I asked three of the audience members — aged fifteen, twenty-three, and thirty-seven — about that, they gave me similar answers. Self-identifying as unemployed members of the popolino napoletano, they wanted to capture the camera operators' attention and be filmed for as long as possible. Through such strategic performances, they could extend their presence on television, which could in turn enhance, as the twenty-three-year-old said, "[her] chance to be noticed by the television channel management and potentially called back for further performances as hopefully a paid showgirl."

One camera was focused on a gossip journalist, who was commenting live on the neomelodic singers' performances. He was wearing a black suit and tie, white shirt, dark sunglasses, and a matching fedora hat. When I asked him why he was dressed like the cosplay of a Quentin Tarantino character, he responded that his attire was "directly inspired

by Hollywood gangster movies" and that "the TV management of Canale Sole had insisted on it to promote the authentic cultural values of the popolino napoletano."

When the gossip journalist learned that I was a scholar visiting Naples from faraway Canada, he insistently asked me to participate in his show as an "international academic expert of neomelodic music." I initially rejected his invitation, since I did not consider myself an expert. He candidly replied that it did not matter, and I could certainly perform as a neomelodic expert "if this suited the standards dictated by the TV network management and its patrons." Thus, my first performance on Camorra-managed television began with small talk about Canadian weather and food. The gangster-looking gossip journalist then made a serious face and provocatively asked me: "As a socio-cultural anthropologist, do you consider neomelodic television to be a legitimate form of Neapolitan traditional art or an illicit expression of Mafia culture?"

My honest answer would have not only contravened network management expectations, but also put my personal safety at risk. I therefore decided to tactically reply with overexaggerated (and largely populist) rhetoric, which I had heard on the several talk shows broadcast by current Italian national televisions. I theatrically claimed that the Camorra was a Neapolitan traditional institution to be evaluated with cultural relativism. As such, the local drug cartels should be praised for investing in the Neapolitan media, since those investments empowered Neapolitan little people who, unlike other Italian publics, have historically been abandoned by the state. In short, I spontaneously claimed things in which I did not fully believe. In so doing, I directly partook in the televised processes of political negotiation through which the so-called popolino napoletano attempt to access forms of personal mobility while reifying the mediacratic hegemony exercised by both the Camorra and the state over their public lives.

Building on the expectations of the local television network's management and its Camorra sponsors, in fact, I had been implicitly requested (as an "academic expert," that is a supposed member of Gramscian civil society) to publicly perform a populist version of my professional self. On the one hand, with my chance to "be on TV" and using my strategic appropriation of populist registers through the informal mediation of local mobsters, I achieved personal gains. For example, I was introduced to the publics of Canale Sole as a respected "international expert" of neomelodic music, regardless of my lack of qualifications in that field. By the same token, I was also allowed to safely accomplish otherwise risky professional activities that ultimately allowed me to compose and publish this very article, such as conducting ethnography within an obviously criminal media enterprise. On the other hand, my tactical performance further legitimized the hegemonic role played by both the Camorra and the Italian state within the Neapolitan peripheries in populist terms. This is because it represented both institutions as cultural producers legitimately competing for their own little people (e.g., the Neapolitan and the national audiences), while defining these publics according to the essential antagonism that supposedly illustrates their authentic cultural values.

However, I was hardly the only cultural operator attempting to gain professional advantages through the performative appropriation of the populist registers of neomelodic television. The gossip journalist, for example, was not a real mobster. Nevertheless, his professional life rested on his ability to aesthetically iconize populist representations of the local audiences' supposedly authentic cultural values. As such, the journalist worked as an informal member of Neapolitan civil society under the authority of local criminal mass-media owners' ad sponsors. However, he enjoyed no artistic agency nor was he truly "organic" to his publics' grassroots customs. In fact, his working on television depended on his ability to represent such publics through explicitly populist aesthetics

and linguistic registers imposed on him by the Camorra owners of Canale Sole and its sponsors.

The neomelodic singers also attempted to increase their personal mobility through the mass mediatization of populist versions of their public selves. Canale Sole visually promoted them as the epitome of achievement that local men of the people could receive under the Camorra's "protection." Surrounded by an adoring female crowd, these singers staged sexualized representations of success that existed only as a faint promise on the horizon, but which they sought through self-exploitative exchanges of labor and money with the Camorra itself. Their participation in Camorra-sponsored media productions was not immediately rewarding from a monetary point of view. In fact, the management of Camorra-sponsored local television stations such as Canale Sole regularly request these singers to pay a racket-fee in exchange for each opportunity to be on television. Nevertheless, such artists' participation in local television shows is fundamental for the promotion of their (quite well-paying) parallel careers in the neomelodic live concert industry and the overall marketing of their charismatic personas among local publics (Giusto 2019).

According to Marco, one of the singers participating in the Canale Sole show, local television stations are crucial to maintaining his charisma and "gangster-like" cultural relevance:

> If I perform in Naples, I can entertain thousands of people per concert. If I perform a live concert in any other area where I do not participate in local television shows, I may lose my charm and end up looking like a clown to the locals. Neomelodic singers may look like cool gangsters, but only within their own media context.

Marco regarded his Camorra-exploited presence on local television as an unavoidable necessity for his social visibility and professional success. His access to this media platform, however, did not capitalize on his artistic skills. As noted above, the singers participating in Canale Sole's neomelodic television shows (as well as many other Camorra-sponsored Neapolitan TV shows) had to lip-synch on stage, not sing live. As with my own performance and that of the gossip journalist, the singers' capacity to milk personal advantages out of their being on television did not rely on their competence but on their capacity to iconize informal hierarchies of power and populist representations of their publics' supposed sociopolitical identities.

The neomelodic "groupies," that is the local women spontaneously reaching the set to engage in intimate dancing with the singers and attract the attention of the Canale Sole cameras, also contributed to staged populist forms of political identity in order to improve their conditions of life. Their constructed hypersexualized attitude toward the singers were televised evidence of the achievements and political values embodied in the public image of these neomelodic entertainers. As such, the fans interpreted their own competitive (as well as quite gendered) approach to both the singers and the cameras as a political strategy legitimated by their status as unemployed little people of Naples, versus any other supposedly non-Neapolitan form of contemporary precariat. Through these women's spontaneous performances, the Camorra further mediated populist forms of potential televised mobility. Access depended on the local subaltern's ability to compete against their peers in telemarketing their own public images. In so doing, as I will show in the next section, the criminal organization implicitly reified the televised approach of the Italian neoliberal state toward populist politics, while (quite ironically) recognizing the

cultural authority of contemporary Italian state power over its own criminal management of the Neapolitan mediascape.

Berlusconism, National Television, and Populist Media Politics

The strategic attitude of the Neapolitan popolino toward the televisual medium is rooted in the contemporary Italian political context and its effect on the management of both national and local television outlets. A rich scholarship in Italian critical studies defines the ability to influence the circulation of televised discourses as a major late-capitalist Italian way of doing politics (Molé 2013; Panarari 2011; Viroli 2010). This phenomenon can be traced back to the mid-1980s. Before then, Italian national television was managed as a public monopoly by Rai (Radiotelevisione Italiana), a state-owned corporation with (declared) educational intentions (Gnagnarella 2010, 21).

In 1984 the Italian Parliament reformed public television through Decree 807, which was (at least on paper) intended to partially privatize national television and thus provide more pluralist sources of information.[2] However, these intentions were largely disregarded by the contents of Decree 807 itself. Of the seven state-owned national television frequencies existing at the time, only one was made available to private investors. Three frequencies continued to be administered by Rai, whose managers were directly appointed by Parliament (Gnagnarella 2010). The remaining frequencies were *ex officio* given to Mediaset, a private holding company owned by a supporter and sponsor of the party coalition governing Italy at the time: media tycoon Silvio Berlusconi (Ginsborg 2005).

This ratio was renegotiated in the mid-1990s, when crucial institutional events triggered the collapse of the social-democratic models of governance that characterized the Italian public sphere during the previous five decades. In 1992 the judiciary uncovered a bribery ring involving the leaders of the political parties governing Italy since 1946 (Koff and Koff 2002, 5). Following this investigation, known as operation *Mani Pulite* [Clean Hands], the Italian national party system imploded along with the forms of political representation it had historically promoted (Viroli 2010, 9). Within this precarious institutional context, Silvio Berlusconi used personal funding to establish Forza Italia, a brand-new political party of overt neoliberal inspiration, right-wing ambitions, and strong anti-intellectual overtones (Ginsborg 2005, 64).

In 1994, Berlusconi's party won the national elections and the media tycoon was appointed *Presidente del Consiglio* [prime minister]. Since then, Italian television drastically changed. Berlusconi's government, as well as its successors of various political stripes, established compulsory control over the management of both public and private national televisions. Most educational television programs were discontinued and replaced with reality shows and infotainment. The new formats promoted the "cults of personality" of prime ministers, as well as explicitly populist representations of Italian society that were denoted by working-class aesthetics, explicit sexism, and nationalist rhetoric (Panarari 2011, 8). Starting in 1994, moreover, Mediaset and Rai cooperated as an informal commercial cartel in the diffusion of common discourses across a politically monitored mediascape, which was impermeable to external investors by legal means (Panarari 2011). In short, the Berlusconian turn transformed Italian TV into a "neoliberal machine of soft power" that impacted the political imaginary of Italians (73).

This change represented a radical shift in the aforementioned historical relationship between the Italian lower classes and the national industries of cultural production, since it finally answered the subaltern's longstanding demand for direct forms of self-representation (Panarari 2011, 75). However, starting in 1994, the methods through which the new Italian "media elites" (that is, the Berlusconian political class, the national media owners, and their

sponsors) allowed the Italian subaltern to partake in media representation of themselves was far from being organic to the lower classes' own interests. Like a *Big Brother*-style reality show, the Berlusconian "regime of representation" circulated essentialized depictions of the Italian subaltern, while highlighting their supposed cultural incompatibility with the values expressed by the former social-democratic intelligentsia (Panarari 2011, 97; Hall 1997). On the one hand, its anti-intellectual tones implied that the aesthetics of most levels of Italian subalternity had finally gained access to the national cultural industry. On the other hand, the arbitrary management of this depiction, which was simultaneously public and private as well as formal and informal, strengthened the grip of the sponsors and owners of Italian televisual outlets (including the neoliberal state itself) over the production and circulation of the cultural productions through which any form of Italian popolino could be publicly represented (Viroli 2010, 32).

Consequently, the Berlusconian approach to media is relevant to Italian politics far beyond the time span over which the institutional activities of Mr. Berlusconi took place. Berlusconism is a well-alive and still ongoing political system, since it historically redefined the mode of cultural production through which centers and peripheries relate to each other in Italy. In 2007, for example, the Italian Parliament passed Law 222, which required TV manufacturers to convert their analog tuners into digital ones.[3] The distribution of state-managed digital television frequencies that followed this reform ended up mirroring the existing status quo. In fact, the majority of these frequencies were freely granted to Mediaset and Rai by Law 222 itself. Not even the electoral collapse of Forza Italia in 2011 or the circulation of Internet-based platforms of social mediation changed the current Italian approach to televised politics. As argued by D'Arma (2015), digital media engendered the "conditions for a more pluralistic media system in Italy" (75). By the same token, they triggered original political phenomena that impacted the current management of Italian state power, such as the recent electoral affirmation of the Internet-based "Five Star Movement" by former television comedian Beppe Grillo (99). Nevertheless, as shown by Mazzoli (2012), the content that was initially broadcast on television still accounts for almost 90 percent of Italian online "trending topics," including those involving institutional politics (62).

According to Molé (2013), this situation engendered "televised subjectivities" among Italian citizens/spectators (292). Given their mistrust of disempowered public institutions, most Italians have promoted television to the rank of an informal private provider of "public" services (290). Prior to Berlusconism, "the primary imaginative form through which Italian state-citizen relations were regulated" was inspired by mid-twentieth-century models of "social citizenship" (Muehlebach 2012, 42; Marshall 1950). Since the mid-1990s, the emancipation of the Italian lower classes no longer depends on their collective renegotiations of the social contract but on their ability to privately intervene in the national mediascape according to their strategic consumption of, and even participation in, populist televisual narratives.

Hence, television ratings became pivotal in determining the state's agenda of public intervention. Meanwhile, national television developed into a powerful apparatus through which individual members of the Italian popolino, such as Ernesto the tailor, could informally negotiate their private claims with the public sphere. The Italians portrayed by Molé (2013, 294), for example, preferred to decry social injustice by calling in to the fictional protagonist of a Mediaset infotainment TV show —a red puppet resembling a Northern Italian working-class man due to his body shape and dialectal tones— rather than complain to public authorities. Similarly, a Neapolitan man of the people like Ernesto wanted to make his case against the Camorra through me, an ethnographic puppet, rather than call the

police. Moreover, the fact that the Neapolitan popolino featured on Canale Sole depended on the televised mediation of the Camorra to improve their life conditions suggests that national television is not the only populist medium through which the Italian poor can access mobility, or through which subaltern politics are expressed in contemporary Italy.

Local Media Outlets, Political Networking, and Populist Identity

More than one thousand local TV channels were available in Italy in 2006 alone, reaching about fifteen million viewers per day (Grasso 2006, 12). One hundred twenty of such small private television networks were based in the Province of Naples (Ravveduto 2007, 118). These media outlets rely on private investments by local entrepreneurs to establish advertising trade with companies operating in the areas covered by their broadcasts (21). This commercial capacity is in turn bound in webs of informal relationality, through which the owners of local television outlets in question mediate their own politico-economic interests with those of their sponsors. Therefore, the regimes of representation characterizing Italian local television mirror the power relations that these relational ties articulate, without fully overlapping with those characterizing national television. Nevertheless, local television networks still maintain strong connections with their national counterparts. In fact, they tend to reproduce the production features of mainstream television on a smaller scale while adapting them to contextual variables (De Pascale 2012, 67).

Since the mid-1990s, for example, the Camorra has well understood the pivotal role played by television within Italian politics. Through targeted investments in Neapolitan local television networks, the criminal organization has attempted to establish itself (in Corrado's words) as "the public voice of the popolino napoletano," while enforcing innovative forms of racketeering by converting local businesses into TV sponsors (De Pascale 2012, 75). In doing so, the Camorra has extended the dynamics of patronage and informal mobility that historically characterize Southern Italian gangsterism beyond the management of local TV outlets. The criminal organization has accomplished this by impacting the "off-screen" political-economic life of the Neapolitan social peripheries via their own broadcasts. One day, for example, I asked Stefania, a Camorra-affiliate supervisor at a local TV network, about her professional experience. She said:

> I once decided that my neighborhood's shops needed to sell their products through teleshopping. In exchange, they could stop paying for my [Camorra] gang's protection. They signed contracts, in which they agreed to pay a monthly fee, plus a share on the sales made by my TV network on their behalf. Everybody was happier. The shop owners paid for a service they could milk profits from. My gang made more money. Even the cops were happy because teleshopping is legal. I even paid taxes on it! It was a good idea. It was modernity!

In other words, the Italian state and the Camorra simultaneously mediate processes of social representation, which are reciprocal in political, economic, and rhetorical terms. As such, they circulate comparable populist forms of social identity and political action amid their publics. According to Laclau (2005), populist politics are defined by an antielitist rhetoric establishing "an internal antagonistic frontier" between "the people" and their supposed institutional enemies (74). State-regulated and Camorra-sponsored Italian TV programs circulate populist rhetorics because they each identify their respective viewers (and potential performers) with holistic representations of "the people," which depend on the alleged conflict between such viewers and other institutional types of "imagined community" (Anderson 1983). The populist rhetoric circulated by Canale Sole, for example, identifies its viewing publics with the popolino napoletano, which they broadly defined through its

loyalty to the Camorra and consequential antagonism to state power. By the same token, Berlusconian television defines the national lower classes (that is, their target audiences) as alien to the discourses on social citizenry promoted by Italian civil society until the mid-1990s, and labeled the latter as external to the aesthetic repertoire of the "people" themselves.

Criticism of Media Populism and the Reproduction of Hegemony

Based on the increasing tension between the populist regimes of representation engendered by local and national television channels, most Italian national media operators (who, at least according to the Gramscian framework, supposedly work within the ranks of civil society) currently employ the derogatory term "trash television" when referring to both types of media. Ettore, for example, was a Neapolitan cadre of a national TV network based in Rome, where he produced high-budget shows. During the interview I conducted at his office, I asked about what type of television he watched and his opinion on Camorra-sponsored local media. From the other side of a desk that was covered by messy piles of documents and a complete collection of *Back to the Future* action figures, he replied:

> I enjoy the weathercast. Everything else is trash television. There are not major differences between national and neomelodic televisions. They are both produced according to similar standards. The TV content I produce is informally "suggested" to me by the network's sponsors, who appeal to specific slices of the social pie for commercial reasons. Their participants and performers are not selected based on their skills but through the informal calls that the castings director informally get from various patrons, politicians, or businessmen. The same happens on neomelodic TV, whose participants are selected based on the Camorra's interests.

The term *la televisione trash* [trash television] is rooted in American media studies. There, it defines "a mode of [cultural] production privileging techniques deprecated by the higher televisual guises," such as those entailing the consistent use of sensationalistic profanities, hypersexualized tropes, and low-budget visuals (Thornton Caldwell 1995, 194). Since the late 1990s, Italian intellectuals and middle-class media operators increasingly appropriated this label to negatively address both Berlusconian and Camorra-sponsored televisions (Bettetini 2004, 298). This is because both media target similar audiences through similar populist formats and banished Gramscian forms of civil society from their previous role in cultural production. In Ettore's own words:

> Media operators and TV networks "middle-level" cadres such as myself have no political autonomy. The Italian media are *egemonizzati* [hegemonized] by various external political agencies. On the local level, they are supervised by informal lobbies like the Camorra. On the national level, they are monitored by political parties, media owners, and their sponsors. Before the 1990s, there was not much trash TV: censorship only involved the removal of sexual references from TV shows. All in all, there was more televisual freedom in times of moral bigotry.

In short, the term trash television is an essentialist commentary on class, indexing populist modes of participation in the (re)production of public knowledge. Its derogatory use by former social-democratic members of civil society currently working under the informal

supervision of the post-Berlusconian elites and their commercial sponsors hints at the exclusion of the contemporary Italian middle class from the administration of cultural production.

Considering this, current Italian populism does not seem to engender, as prophesized by Stavrakakis and colleagues (2017), the crisis of hegemony historically exercised by the capitalist upper classes over the middle and lower classes. This hegemony is reproduced in contemporary Italy by the proactive engagement of various subaltern publics, who can range from lower-class audiences and potential media performers to middle-upper-class national TV operators such as Ettore, with mirroring forms of political patronage, populist regimes of social representations, and televised techniques of informal governmentality.

Conclusions

Chatterjee's (2004) work on popular politics suggests that the phenomena described in this article are not limited to the Italian context. In fact, the centrality of financialized state power within regimes of neoliberal governance generally leads to institutional anxieties over the administration of socially peripheral spaces, which cannot be managed by corporate capital but by informal means only (224). By the same token, the neoliberal civil society members' actions cannot easily permeate these spaces because of their increasing entanglements with highly financialized forms of public economy (38). Consequently, such spaces are inhabited by precarious subjects (including formerly middle-class cultural operators) who make a living informally and thus relate to state power through pragmatic negotiations over their life conditions rather than institutionally (72).

The neoliberal Italian state, I suggest, has regimented the political lives of its citizens/spectators —referred to by Chatterjee (2004, 4) as "political society"— through televised logics of informal governmentality that entangle both the hegemonic and the subaltern with common regimes of representation and televised forms of political patronage. Within this context, any distinction between civil and political societies is very complicated: their respective degrees of agency over the televisual medium seems inspired by similar informal modalities of participation in the public sphere. On the one hand, this has returned the subaltern to the center of public debate, while granting them self-empowering tools of personal mobility. On the other hand, it has prevented any form of popolino from engaging in concerted politics aimed at collective forms of socioeconomic advancement. This is because the populist processes of subaltern publicity through which the Italian citizens/spectators can concretely engage with televised politics are dominated by self-exploitative logics of asymmetrical patronage and intraclass competition. Far from furthering any democratization of the Italian public sphere, such neoliberal logics of personal mobility (together with the populist forms of cultural production that they engender) ultimately alienate Italian television viewers and operators alike from engaging in truly counter-hegemonic common processes of class consciousness versus the (either legal or criminal) post-Berlusconian mediacratic elites. Instead, they inadvertently reproduce the hegemony of the latter over their political lives.

As my ethnography has shown, members of the Neapolitan civil and political societies negotiated their access to personal forms of mobility through plural types of televised political action. These negotiations took three forms. The first form involved subjects concretely attempting to do "whatever it takes" to perform on television and improve their visibility vis-à-vis local and national audiences. This is observed in the similar political attitudes toward television expressed by socially diverse subjects like Ernesto the tailor and the neomelodic singers performing on Canale Sole. A second form of political negotiation involved middle

class subjects stipulating informal agreements with the owners and sponsors of local and national means of cultural production, as seen in my analysis of the common conditions of patronage adopted by television managers like Ettore and lower-class television operators such as the journalist working for Canale Sole. The third form of negotiation involve the socio-political identity of local and national TV audiences, who appropriate the populist discourses legitimating the hegemony of legal or criminal mediacratic elites for the sake of partaking in one of the previous two forms of televised politics.

Accordingly, the Gramscian notion of civil society is not an inadequate tool for pinpointing the informal processes of political mediation that reproduce neoliberal forms of hegemony within current Italian populism. The boundary between civil and political societies is blurred in contemporary Italian televised politics, as they both negotiate their agency according to their direct engagement with similar dynamics of informal patronage and populist performative registers. In so doing, they both gain access to similar informal modalities of personal mobility, relational labor, and overall cultural production, as a common "political" class of populist citizens/spectators.

By partaking in similar televised politics, both the neoliberal state and the Camorra attempt to naturalize the subaltern conditions of the media operators they employ and the lower-class audiences they target. They do so via mediacratic regimes of representation that conveniently illustrate cultural operators and their publics as social subjects in no need for collective change due to two main factors: (1) their direct engagement with common performances depict them as "authentic voices of the people" vis-à-vis their publics; and (2) the conditions of personal mobility concretely available to them are strictly dependent on their supposedly "free" willingness to partake in the aforementioned televisual performances.

Far from challenging the hegemony of the state, moreover, the televised politics exercised by the Camorra are comparable to those that characterize Berlusconian forms of neoliberal governmentality. In fact, they both informally mediate lower-class lives and aesthetics, thus turning subaltern publics into populist mainstreams. Formal and informal mediacratic institutions such as the Italian state and the Neapolitan Camorra therefore support each other in their respective sovereignty over the ongoing reproduction of the hegemonic and the subaltern. At the same time, they cooperate in the construction, circulation, and entrenchment of populist imaginaries and televised modalities of access to the public sphere.

Notes

The research on which this article is based was financially supported by the Wenner-Gren Foundation, the Department of Anthropology at the University of Toronto, the Department of Anthropology at the University of Montreal, and the Centre for the Study of Korea at the University of Toronto. I am sincerely grateful for the generous support of these institutions. I am also extremely grateful to all those (anonymous or not) reviewers, colleagues, mentors, and friends who provided me with invaluable insights on the best way to convey my research findings.

1. All names are pseudonyms. All interviews and encounters were conducted in Italian. I translated the notes for this article.
2. Gazzetta Ufficiale del Parlamento Italiano (Official Gazette of the Italian Parliament), 1984, Decreto Legge n. 807, http://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/home.
3. Gazzetta Ufficiale del Parlamento Italiano (Official Gazette of the Italian Parliament), 2007, Legge 22, http://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/home.

References Cited

Abu-Lughod, Lila. 2004. *Dramas of Nationhood: The Politics of Television in Egypt*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Anderson, Benedict. 1983. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. New York: Verso.

Aretxaga, Begoña. 2000. "A Fictional Reality: Paramilitary Death Squads and the Construction of State Terror in Spain." In *Death Squad: The Anthropology of State Terror*, edited by Jeffrey Sluka, 46–69. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Banfield, Edward. (1958) 1967. *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society*. New York: Free Press.

Benjamin, Walter. (1935) 1969. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." In *Illuminations*, edited by Hanna Arendt, 1–26. New York: Schocken Books.

Ben-Yehoyada, Naor. 2018. "Where Do We Go When We Follow the Money? The Political-Economic Construction of Antimafia Investigators in Western Sicily." *History and Anthropology* 29 (3): 359–75.

Bettetini, Gianfranco. 2004. *Le logiche della televisione* [The logics of television]. Milan: Franco Angeli Editore.

Comaroff, Jean and Comaroff, John. 2001. "Millennial Capitalism: First Thoughts on a Second Coming." In *Millennial Capitalism and the Culture of Neoliberalism*, edited by Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, 1–56. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Chatterjee, Partha. 2004. *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World*. New York: Columbia University Press.

D'Arma, Alessandro. 2015. *Media and Politics in Contemporary Italy: From Berlusconi to Grillo*. London: Lexington Books.

De Pascale, Alessandro. 2012. *Telecamorra. Guerra tra clan per il controllo dell'etere* [Telecamorra war among gangs for the control of the television airwaves]. Rome: Lantana Editore.

Eisenlhor, Patrick. 2009. "Technologies of the Spirit. Devotional Islam, Sound Reproduction and the Dialectic of Mediation and Immediacy in Mauritius." *Anthropological Theory* 9 (3): 273–96.

Gambetta, Diego. 2009. *Codes of the Underworld: How Criminals Communicate*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Ginsborg, Paul. 2005. *Silvio Berlusconi: Television, Power and Patrimony*. New York: Verso.

Giusto, Salvatore. 2019. "One of Us: the Neomelodic Music Industry as a Camorra-Mediated Space of Subaltern Publicity in Contemporary Naples." *Global Crime* 20 (2): 134–55.

Gnagnarella, Giuseppe. 2010. *Storia politica della Rai: 1945–2010* [A political history of Rai: 1945–2010]. L'Aquila: Textus Edizioni.

Gramsci, Antonio. (1930) 2006. *The Southern Question*. Translated by Pasquale Verdicchio. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Grasso, Aldo. 2006. *La TV del sommerso. Viaggio nell'Italia delle TV locali* [Underground TV. An exploration of Italian local TV]. Milan: Mondadori.

Gusterson, Hugh. 2017. "From Brexit to Trump: Anthropology and the Rise of Nationalist Populism." *American Ethnologist* 44 (2): 209–14.

Habermas, Jürgen. 1992. "Further Reflections on the Public Sphere." In *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, edited by Craig Calhoun, 421–61. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Hall, Stuart. 1997. "The Work of Representation." In *Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, edited by Stuart Hall, 13–74. London: Sage.

Himpele, Jeff. 2002. "Arrival Scenes: Complicity and Media Ethnography in the Bolivian Public Sphere." In *Media Worlds. Anthropology on New Terrain*, edited by Faye Ginsburg, Lila Abu-Lughod, and Brian Larkin, 301–18. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Holmes, Douglas. 2000. *Integral Europe. Fast-Capitalism, Multiculturalism, Neofascism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Koff, Sondra, and Stephen Koff. 2002. *Italy: From the First to the Second Republic*. New York: Routledge.

Laclau, Ernesto. 2005. *On Populist Reason*. London: Verso.

Larkin, Brian. 2008. *Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure, and Urban Culture in Nigeria*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Marshall, Thomas Humphrey. 1950. "Citizenship and Social Class." In *Citizenship and Social Class and Other Essays*, edited by Thomas Humphrey Marshall, 249–60. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mazzoli, Lella. 2012. "Miti, rischi e realtà del consumo delle news online" [Myths, risks, and the reality of online news consumption]. In *Scienza Connessa. Rete Media e Social Network*, edited by Sveva Avveduto, 57–66. Rome: Gangemi Editore.

Molé, Noelle. 2011. *Labor Disorders in Neoliberal Italy*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

———. 2013. "Trusted Puppets, Tarnished Politicians: Humor and Cynicism in Berlusconi's Italy." *American Ethnologist* 40 (2): 288–99.

Mouffe, Chantal. 2018. *For a Left Populism*. London: Verso.

Muehlebach, Andrea. 2012. *The Moral Neoliberal. Welfare and Citizenship in Italy*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Panarari, Massimiliano. 2011. *L'egemonia sotto culturale. L'Italia da Gramsci al gossip [Sub-cultural hegemony. Italy from Gramsci to gossip]*. Turin: Einaudi Editore.

Pine, Jason. 2012. *The Art of Making Do in Naples*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Rakopoulos, Theodoros. 2017. "Façade Egalitarianism? Mafia and Cooperative in Sicily." *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 40 (1): 104–21.

Ravveduto, Marcello. 2007. *Napoli ... Serenata calibro 9* [Naples ... A 9-millimeter serenade]. Naples: Liguori Editore.

Schiller, Naomi. 2013. "Reckoning with Press Freedom: Community Media, Liberalism, and the Processual State in Caracas, Venezuela." *American Ethnologist* 40 (3): 540–54.

Schneider, Jane. 1998. "The Dynamics of Neo-Orientalism in Italy (1848–1995)." In *Italy's "Southern Question": Orientalism in One Country*, edited by Jane Schneider, 1–23. New York: Berg.

Schneider, Jane, and Peter Schneider. 2003. *Reversible Destiny. Mafia, Antimafia, and the Struggle for Palermo*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1988. *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Basingstoke, UK: MacMillan.

Stavrakakis, Yannis, Giorgos Katsambekis, Nikos Nikisianis, Alexandros Kioupkiolis, and Thomas Siomos. 2017. "Extreme Right-Wing Populism in Europe: Revisiting a reified association." *Critical Discourse Studies* 14 (4): 420–39.

Thornton Caldwell, John. 1995. *Televisuality: Style, Crisis, and Authority in American Television*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Viroli, Maurizio. 2010. *The Liberty of Servants: Berlusconi's Italy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Žižek, Slavoj. 2009. "Berlusconi in Tehran." *London Review of Books* 31 (14): 3–7.