

The stuff that dreams are made of

Why Berlusconi did not lose votes in spite of sexual scandals media frenzy

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Table of contents

Introduction.....	3
Noemigate: mother of all scandals	4
Noemi’s contribution to communication studies	7
The best defence is attack.....	10
A picture is worth a thousand words	16
Appendix.....	23
References.....	28

Introduction

The campaign for European elections in Italy has been characterised by the discussion around a series of extra-political events involving Premier Silvio Berlusconi. The coverage of these events gained increasing importance in the Italian and international media environment. European issues virtually disappeared from the media agenda and the personal life of the “Cavaliere” took its place.

Criticism of the Prime Minister behaviour was raised by the Italian press, the international media and even by his very own wife. Various observers estimated that this would affect the career of the politician Berlusconi. However, the results of the election showed little changes if compared to the tremendous political victory of the previous year. As a British newspaper summarizes:

[i]n most countries, such accusations would elicit a clamour of public indignation, followed by official investigations and, in all likelihood, a shamefaced resignation. Not in Italy (...) his centre-Right People of Freedom party still won 35 per cent of the vote, and his personal popularity remains around 50-60 per cent (Telegraph June 16th).

In this work we intend to focus on what happened (and did not happen) during the campaign for European election and to attempt and explain why Berlusconi's popularity and electoral results did not suffer from the negative coverage received during the whole campaign.

Noemigate: mother of all scandals

As we mentioned before, the whole campaign for European elections was characterized by the debate about *personal issues* involving the premier Silvio Berlusconi. The journalistic practice of convergence fostered the promotion of similar content across platforms. Press, television, radio and internet were involved in a process of cross-media coverage of unprecedented intensity.

Personal issues monopolized the attention of the media and any other subject was virtually banned from the media agenda. A modest quantity of time was dedicated to discussing the role of the European Parliament, the proposals of action and candidates' backgrounds. These issues were relegated to dedicated TV spaces during the last week of the campaign; however the attention they received can be hardly considered more than residual.

Before discussing the issue further we consider it useful to briefly remember the string of events that happened in the month ahead of the European vote.

It is Veronica Lario, Berlusconi's wife of nearly 20 years who opened the debate, denouncing as «shamelessly tacky» Berlusconi's party plans to put forward as potential candidates a series of starlets with little or no political experience.

Only a few days later, Miss Lario criticised her husband for «consorting with minors», disapproving of his decision to attend a girl's 18th birthday party, when he did not attend his own children's. The girl, Noemi Letizia, became a major protagonist of the news, dominating the country's media for a month. The scandal that followed was named after her *Noemigate*. Berlusconi's wife soon announced, through leaks to the press, that she was demanding a divorce.

The media were still dealing with this scandal when one more arrived with the allegations that the Prime Minister was using official government aircraft to fly private guests to his luxury villa in Sardinia, as a picture clearly showed. This added one more chapter to Berlusconi's trouble with justice, the latest involving Berlusconi *via* his British lawyer, David Mills. In April Mills was sentenced, in a first instance judgment, to four years and six months in jail for corruption. According to Milan judges, Mills – who has already appealed the decision - received \$600,000 from Berlusconi to lie in a trial where the Italian leader was accused of tax evasion.

Finally, only a few days before the vote, the Spanish newspaper El País published photographs taken in the Prime Minister's Sardinian villa showing topless women lounging on the patios and a naked man that

was later discovered to be former Czech prime minister, Mirek Topolánek.

Not only did these events obtain enormous coverage, they also captured the attention of the public. This data can spread a light on the phenomenon: in the first week of the Noemigate, nine out of ten of the most clicked news of the website of the newspaper *Il Corriere della Sera* were related to the scandal (Corriere della Sera Magazine, 14th May¹).

Therefore the first question we find interesting to address regards the reason for a similar pattern of media coverage and public attention engendered by a series of mostly personal events such as a divorce and an extramarital affair.

The first reason can be indicated in an alteration in the attitude towards politician behaviour. Traditionally in Italy scandals were more often connected with judicial problems than a leader's love life (Roncarolo 2004). However, over the years the visibility of political actors has been constantly broadening including their private lives, that have been used «as a strategic resource both in the image-building process and in their relationship with journalists and citizens» (Roncarolo 2004, p. 109). This is especially true for Berlusconi:

He was the first to use autobiographical material, and during recent years has systematically exploited his private life, both in campaigns and in the

¹ Corriere della Sera Magazine. Le 10 notizie più lette della settimana. 14th May, n. 19/2009, p. 26.

daily battle for popularity. From the outset, he decided to present himself as a political entrepreneur whose credibility was guaranteed by his personal success in business (Roncarolo 2004, p. 116).

Thus the first reason lies in the special nature of Berlusconi's private life that received constant attention over the years and contributed to the rupture of the traditional separation between private and public spheres, «a distinction that Berlusconi considers irrelevant» (Roncarolo 2004, p. 116).

The second reason lies in a bigger pattern regulating media attention. While trying to maximize audience for commercial purposes, the media developed a specific taste for good stories (Gans 1979), «this structure of a good story emphasizes drama, conflict, novelty, colourful events, fiction-like story lines, strategy and personalities» (Sheafer 2001, p. 713). Analyzed from this point of view, Berlusconi's story had all the elements that made it a good story for the media.

Noemi's contribution to communication studies

The second question we intend to answer is related to the (lack of) consequences for such a massive negative coverage. Why after so harsh a campaign did Berlusconi managed to maintain his popularity and

votes?² We intend to answer this question referring to both general and person specific reasons related to Berlusconi's story. Let us start with the general frame.

In his analysis of the impact of the Lewinsky-Clinton affair John Zaller (1998) reflects upon the fact that Clinton ended up with higher job approval ratings than he began with. This was considered highly unlikely:

No one could have predicted that Clinton would survive the opening round of the Lewinsky affair nearly so well as he did (Zaller p. 184).

Why did this happen? He explains this data arguing that the public judges politicians focusing «on political substance ... more than by the antics of Media Politics» (Zaller 1998, p. 187):

[i]t seems entirely plausible to suggest that the poll bounce that Clinton got at the time of the Lewinsky matter was driven by the same thing that drives presidential election outcomes and presidential popularity in general – political substance. It was not admiration for Bill Clinton's character that first buttressed and then boosted his approval ratings. It was the public's reaction to the delivery of outcomes and policies that the public wants (Zaller 1998, p. 185).

² As we will see in the Appendix, the moderate flections in votes (3%) can be attributed to political issues in the region of Sicily.

The idea that voters judge their representatives focusing «on a bottom line consisting of peace, prosperity and moderation» is supported by a series of studies (Kramer 1971, Fiorina 1981, Rosenstone 1983).

A further possibility, albeit less evident, is that «the public makes a distinction between approving the way the president does his job and approving of the president as a person» (Zaller 1998, p.184). In both cases the impact of sexual scandals on political popularity can be considered irrelevant.

If this is true in a society where intimate matters are made public (Sabato et al. 2000) then *a fortiori* we can consider it true in a country like Italy, where «love affairs are more likely to be a reason for admiring those involved than an object of moral judgement or a source of scandal» (Roncarolo 2004 p. 108).

As we have seen before, much has been written about the behaviour of Berlusconi and a great attention has been dedicated to the comments (mostly negative). However little has been said about his countermoves. This will be the focus of the next paragraph.

The best defence is attack

In the days following the scandals Berlusconi gave his version about the story with a series of statements that received great coverage and were reported by the Italian press and television. This defence played a great role in Berlusconi's defence strategy.

The statements are aimed at pursuing an *attention diverting strategy*. The objective was to divert the attention of the media public off the scandal and towards different issues. For example in the candidates and in Noemi's scandals the attack is promoted towards the leftwing press that in Berlusconi's opinion was responsible for this *manoeuvre*:

Silvio Berlusconi has taken offence with the 'left-wing press' after the controversy that followed the negotiations for the PdL's choices for EU government candidates. For the Premier, "Ms. Veronica also believed what they wrote in the newspapers. I am sorry," said the Premier (Agi, 29th April³).

It is all a move perpetrated by the left-wing press (...) This is a very clear situation to me, there was a manoeuvre made by the left-wing press and

³ Agi 1, April 29th, [On line]: Berlusconi, Veronica? She believed the left-wing press. <http://www.agi.it/english-version/italy/elenco-notizie/200904291314-pol-ren0030-berlusconi_veronica_she_believed_the_left_wing_press>. [Access: 02/05/09].

the opposition on our candidates, with news that is absolutely false (Agi, 29th April⁴)

"My wife has fallen into a trap" said Italian Premier Silvio Berlusconi during the filming of television programme 'Porta a Porta'. "The story of these showgirls" he added "is absolutely untrue, these are invented stories". According to the premier "there never have been what you could call showgirls" on the lists of the PDL party for the European elections (Agi 3, 5th May⁵)

What has happened "would not have taken place if the press had reported things correctly" said Silvio Berlusconi referring to the issue regarding Mrs. Lario. "The leftwing and its press" he added "are unable to accept my popularity of 75pct and considering the state they are in have started personal attacks based on slander" (Agi 4, 5th May⁶).

⁴ Agi 2, April 29th, [On line]: EU candidates: Berlusconi, move perpetrated by left-wing.

<http://www.agi.it/english-version/italy/elenco-notizie/200904291312-pol-ren0027-eu_candidates_berlusconi_move_perpetrated_by_left_wing>. [Access: 02/05/09].

⁵ Agi 3, May 5th, [On line]: Berlusconi: Veronica fallen into trap, showgirls? Lies. <http://www.agi.it/english-version/italy/elenco-notizie/200905052009-pol-ren0068-berlusconi_veronica_fallen_into_trap_showgirls_lies>. [Access: 10/05/09].

⁶ Agi 4, May 5th, [On line]: Berlusconi: Slander by leftwing and its press. <http://www.agi.it/english-version/italy/elenco-notizie/200905051926-pol-ren0066-berlusconi_slander_by_leftwing_and_its_press>. [Access: 10/05/09].

The same strategy is implemented to face the other scandals, for example Mr Mills' ruling for accepting bribes and false witness aimed at protecting Berlusconi and the Fininvest group⁷. In this case Berlusconi's statements are aimed at shifting the attention from the allegation and the sentence to the *leftist* judges and the reform of the judicial system:

The premier (...) reiterated his belief that the ruling against British lawyer David Mills was issued by "leftist extremist judges", was "scandalous" and "exactly contrary to the truth" (Ansa, 21st May⁸).

"This morning the newspapers say that you cannot criticise judges. Instead, I believe that is the right of every citizen to criticise judges," he told the employers' meeting in Rome (Adnkronos, 21st May⁹).

Berlusconi's People of Freedom party claimed Gandus [the judge] had issued her ruling (...) to damage the premier's popularity ahead of upcoming local and European Parliament elections (Adnkronos, 21st May).

⁷ The premier was removed from the same trial under a new immunity law.

⁸ Ansa, May 21st, [On line]: Mills sentence 'Like Mourinho refereeing Milan-Inter', PM.

<<http://www.adnkronos.com/AKI/English/Politics/?id=3.0.3343135316>>.

[Access: 25/05/09].

⁹ Adnkronos, May 21st, [On line]: Italy: Berlusconi renews attack on judiciary.

<<http://www.adnkronos.com/AKI/English/Politics/?id=3.0.3343135316>>.

[Access: 25/05/09].

"We will not stop until we have separated the role of the magistrates from the role of prosecutors," he [Berlusconi] said (Adnkronos, 21st May).

In the same occasion Berlusconi uses an expression that deserves special attention:

The alleged political bias of a judge who found Premier Silvio Berlusconi's corporate lawyer guilty of perjury meant the trial was equivalent to Inter coach Jose' Mourinho "refereeing a Milan-Inter match," Berlusconi said (Ansa, 21st May).

In an effort to show the partisanship of the judge he uses the conceptual metaphor THE JUDICIAL SYSTEM IS FOOTBALL. In order to make an abstract issue like the partisanship of a judge easier to understand, Berlusconi refers to a more concrete domain, football. This use is not new and it actually is part of a consolidated tradition, first analyzed by Semino and Masci (1996):

the most central and salient metaphor that was adopted in the creation and promotion of Berlusconi's political movement draws from sports, specifically football, as its source domain (...) Berlusconi is keen to exploit his football successes to promote his political career. The POLITICS IS FOOTBALL metaphor is instrumental in creating a scenario where, in spite of his political inexperience and his conflict of interests, Berlusconi is

perfectly qualified to take charge of the government of the country (Semino and Masci 1996, pp. 248-249).

The *attention-diverting* pattern has also been applied in dealing with the scandal that followed the publication on El País of a series of potentially embarrassing photographs – one showing a topless young woman, another portraying a middle-aged nude man. The Spanish newspaper maintained a critical opinion, claiming that «the pictures from Villa Certosa reveal that there is an obvious lack of inhibitions in the mansion, which is protected by strong security measures» (El País, 5th June¹⁰). In this case Berlusconi manages to shift the attention from a moral judgment to a privacy issue:

There is an unacceptable breach of privacy (Adnkronos, 5th June¹¹).

There is nothing scandalous in these pictures but this is a violation of my privacy and a scandalous aggression (...) These pictures go against any sense of private life. This right to a private life and to confidentiality are fundamental liberties (Sky News, 5th June).

¹⁰ El País, 5th June, [On line]: The pictures vetoed by Berlusconi. <http://www.elpais.com/articulo/internacional/The/pictures/vetoed/by/Berlusconi/elpepuint/20090605elpepuint_3/Tes>. [Access: 12/06/09].

¹¹ Adnkronos, June 5th, [On line]: Italy: PM demands privacy as Spanish daily prints banned photos. <<http://www.adnkronos.com/AKI/English/Politics/?id=3.0.3396895864>>. [Access: 10/06/09].

In all cases examined Berlusconi chooses to avoid an explicit defence and to divert the public attention away from the scandals¹². He aims at directing the media agenda on favourable issues while criticising his opponents. At the same time he follows a strategy based on *repetition*, a technique well known in advertising and considered effective in political discourse (Nimmo 2001). Thus he holds his position, and keeps repeating his opinions over and over with the intent to make it easier for the listeners to remind it with no conscious effort (Rank 1984).

The combined use of attention diverting and repetition constitutes the strategy adopted by Prime Minister Berlusconi to defend himself from the accusations he received during the month before the elections. In this way he manages to operate a shift from being the defendant to being the victim and then the prosecutor, following a well-known pattern that allowed him to carry on his political career in spite of the long series of criminal charges he faced since 1994.

¹² The verbal pattern of defense adopted by Berlusconi resembles in part Clinton's strategy: «As I parse Clinton's defense, it has consisted of two flat assertions: "I didn't do it" and "my enemies are out to get me"» (Zaller 1998 p. 184). Berlusconi focuses more clearly on the second part. We cannot avoid mentioning that Clinton's State of the Union address occurred seven days after Lewinsky's story broke. As it has played a role in his defense strategy it is interesting to note that: «Clinton's speech was, first of all, a celebration of a list of "accomplishment" that would be any president's dream» (Zaller 1998, p. 184). Berlusconi did not forget this part and enumerated all the achievements of his govern during the TV talk-show *Porta a Porta*, a few days before the vote.

It must be stated that the verbal defence represents only a part of Berlusconi's strategy. The entire phenomenon cannot be understood if we only focus on the words, in fact images played a possibly more crucial role. This will be the topic analyzed in more detail in the following paragraph.

A picture is worth a thousand words

While the national and international press was reporting Berlusconi's divorce and discussing whether the Prime Minister should resign for *consorting with minors*, "Chi", a glossy magazine owned by Mondadori, the Italian publisher controlled by Silvio Berlusconi holding, features a series of articles dedicated to the personal history of the media tycoon. The articles are basically a *story in pictures* as the title clearly reveals: *Silvio Berlusconi, «My memories photo album»*.

In the same period Libero, an Italian Right-wing newspaper publishes *Berlusconi tale e quale* (Berlusconi as he is) with the subtitle "Life, conquers, battles and passions of a political man unique in the world". Published as a serial, from May 12th to June 4th, it is replete with photos of Berlusconi as well as articles illustrating every aspect of his life.

The two publications resemble each other and remind us of the booklets about his biography that Berlusconi sent to voters' homes

ahead of the 2001 and 2006 election. What all these products have in common is the topic, a narration of Berlusconi's transformation from a middle class child to cruise ship crooner to real estate mogul to media magnate to prime minister. They all share a special focus on images¹³; Berlusconi is pictured as an important world leader, standing alongside head of states and celebrities, from George Bush to Pope Benedict XVI, from rock star Bono to motorcycling champion Valentino Rossi. The pictures highlight different dimensions of his life, portraying him in diverse contexts. He is shown as a *successful sport person*, holding the Champions League Trophy, as a *good father and husband*, posing with his family members, as a *good politician*, visiting earthquake-stricken Abruzzo and a *military chief*, having a meal with Italian troops in Afghanistan wearing camouflage hat and jacket.

A special emphasis is put on highlighting his middle class origins, and in reminding the public of the financial difficulties his family faced during wartime. This emphasis is necessary to insert Berlusconi's life in a narrative frame. As Belpoliti (2009) underlines, Berlusconi expresses the promise of a *happy end*, he embodies the realization of a dream, not just his dream but a dream everybody can identify himself with, he is *one-of-us* that became "*Somebody*". In this sense, it is correct to affirm that "Berlusconi tale e quale" and the other glossy biographies

¹³ As Belpoliti (2009) underlines, Berlusconi is the first Italian politician since the end of the Second World War to be concerned with his image with the same regularity as Mussolini.

he released over the years are a *fairytale for grown-ups* (Belpoliti 2009, p. 101); their narrative style and the emphasis on pictures makes them look like hagiographies, they remind us of the tradition of the *Biblia pauperum* ("Paupers' Bible") in a postmodern version.

Although this explains in part Berlusconi's successes, it still does not help us understand why the sexual scandals did not affect him, even though he is a political representative of the catholic vote, concerned with family and moral values. An analysis of the visual image of Berlusconi as it emerges from the publications mentioned before can provide us with a better comprehension of the phenomenon.

A few days after the scandal, Berlusconi is portrayed on the *Chi* issue and on *Berlusconi Tale e quale* in a variety of situations. Both of them feature the images of a young Berlusconi at the beach, in a body builder pose. He shows off his body in a series of pictures that remind us of the stereotype of the *latin lover macho type*. These photographs are in contrast with other images published in the same period by the same media. They represent Berlusconi with his wife and/or with his sons and daughters and are aimed at creating the representation of the *good husband and father*, attentive of the needs of his family and respectful of the family values.

The apparent contrast of these images explains clearly the nature of Silvio Berlusconi. On the one hand he wants to appear and appears as a *latin lover* and a *tombreur de femme*. On the other hand he pays attention to showing respect for his family and intends to present

himself as a *good family man*. On the one hand he is prone to entertain the public with light-hearted, sexual allusions, when he openly shows his passion for women and promotes his image of a *libertine*. On the other hand he fosters politics of strict adherence to Vatican directions.

Understanding this ambivalence is crucial to understanding Berlusconi: it is this very ambivalence that makes Berlusconi an *icon*. In fact ambivalence characterizes the icon of postmodern mythology (Maffesoli 2009). The mark of the icon is his capacity to gather different elements in a single emblematic character. This character is plural and ambivalent and this is the feature that makes it attracting.

The icon is fascinating because it represents *L'esprit du temps* (Morin 1962). Postmodern times need a postmodern icon and Berlusconi embodies it perfectly. Bodei's (1997) definition of postmodernism makes it clearer. Modern man was characterized by a solid and more durable identity. He was a *pilgrim* that moved towards a destination and a project. The postmodern time, instead, is represented by an individual able to reside in a series of provisional identities, changeable and fluctuating; he is a *nomad*, his identity is *plastic*, *mobile*, *erasable and as recyclable as a videotape*.

We are then getting closer to answering our initial question. In fact, as Maffesoli shows in his analysis of soccer player Zinedine Zidane, ambivalence is the crucial feature that allows the icon behaviours that would not be tolerated for common people. The French soccer player, known for his elegance and fair play was sent off in the 110th minute of

a World Championship final for an off-the-ball head-butt of an Italian player. The symbol of the National team, the captain, one of the strong football players ever was not there when the high time of penalty kicks came. And France lost the game. He has been forgiven and understood by the French public opinion *for* and *because of* his behaviour that shows all human weakness. 'The hero is like me' the layman can say, he is a mix of meanness and munificence. This is the very feature of the real icon, that it gathers the parts of a plural character and shows them all.

Not only has he been forgiven, he has also been admired for his head-butt. when the cause became public (the player had offended his sister). Zidane did it in the name of honour, in the name of the holiest of values, family honour. Within the same weakness he expresses the highest values. The icon is contradictory, thus incongruous, states Maffesoli.

The same applies for Berlusconi. His behaviour as a Don Giovanni¹⁴, if proved, would contain both weakness and strength. This is why Berlusconi is able to show contradictory characters without falling in contradiction and actually taking advantage of it. Not only is he a star, he shows all the characters of a postmodern icon, thus every behaviour

¹⁴ We shall not fail to observe that the very character of Don Giovanni (Don Juan in Spanish) contains a mix of black and white. The legendary fictional libertine has been celebrated in different cultures and times by the likes of Tirso de Molina, Molière, Byron and Mozart.

can be forgiven by his 'public' of voters and even contributes to feed his icon.

His iconic status is summarized in a single object in a cover of the *Chi* magazine. Berlusconi is portrayed with a pipe in his mouth in a picture reminding us of the stereotype of a Hollywood actor of the 60's. The image plays with ideal and archetypical signs that Berlusconi has exploited heavily in the past. As Belpoliti (2009) states, in constructing his image Berlusconi followed the model of the Hollywood actors from his youth. In particular, the famous picture by Evaristo Fusar* shows how he exploited the archetype of the *good-bad boy*, the half-good/half-bad character embodied by Humphrey Bogart¹⁵ in Hollywood movies. As Sklar (1992) suggests, it was Bogart's *doubleness*, ability to portray a character that effectively embody two conflicting ideas is what eventually projected him to stardom. This is a general pattern; in his opinion actors who create surprise, embody contradiction, impel the spectator to hold two conflicting ideas in the head at the same time, are more likely to be successful. We understand now how a single Berlusconi's photograph explains, contains and promotes¹⁶ the essence of the icon, the natural ambivalence that fascinates the postmodern audience.

¹⁵ In the 1941 film *The Maltese Falcon* Bogart pronounces the famous (last) line "The stuff that dreams are made of". It has been voted 14th best quotation in American cinema, by the American Film Institute.

¹⁶ Berlusconi builds his image following the process described by Morin (1960), that reveals how the stars bluff, tend to exaggerate and build their own myth.

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Appendix

And the winner is...

This section will be dedicated to a brief illustration of the electoral results, aimed at giving the reader a fuller comprehension of the campaign and the Italian political context. We also intend to contrast the idea that Berlusconi's party lost votes in the European elections because of sexual scandals.

Berlusconi's Freedom People Party (Pdl) obtained 35.3% of the vote in the elections for the European parliament, three percent less than the result obtained in 2008 general elections. The moderate fluctuation is due, in good part, of failure to form an alliance Mpa, a minor Christian-democratic and regionalist political party with strong support in Sicily. The region, which is the second most populated in Italy, is a traditional stronghold of Berlusconi. In 2008, for example, Berlusconi's Pdl list, that included Mpa candidates, gained 48% of the vote. In the European elections the two parties ran separately: Pdl obtains a 'mere' 36.5%, while Mpa gathers 12.4%¹⁷. If we sum the two results we obtain 39% a result that is even better than the one obtained in 2008.

¹⁷ The data are referred to the 'Isole' electoral district, that includes Sicily and Sardinia.

A party that presumably takes advantage of Pdl slight downfall is the Northern League that won 10% nationally, with peaks around 30% in Northern Italy.

With right-wing parties around 50% and Christian democratic center (Udc) stable at 6.5%, the left-wing is living its worst moment. The Democratic Party, the largest one in opposition, managed to get just 26% of the vote, falling by 7% from last year's elections. Divided and quarrelsome, it keeps losing popularity and votes; it can hardly be denied that the success of Berlusconi has been possible also thanks to the lack of a valid alternative.

The main winner in the center-left appears to be anti-corruption *Italia dei Valori* (Italy of Values), headed by former *Clean Hands* magistrate Antonio Di Pietro, which carry out harsh criticism of Berlusconi. The party showed a progressive growth; it nearly doubled its score, from 4.4 per cent last year to 8 per cent, quadrupling the votes obtained in the previous European election. Another piece of evidence that the whole political life in Italy gravitates around the icon Berlusconi.

The stuff that dreams are made of

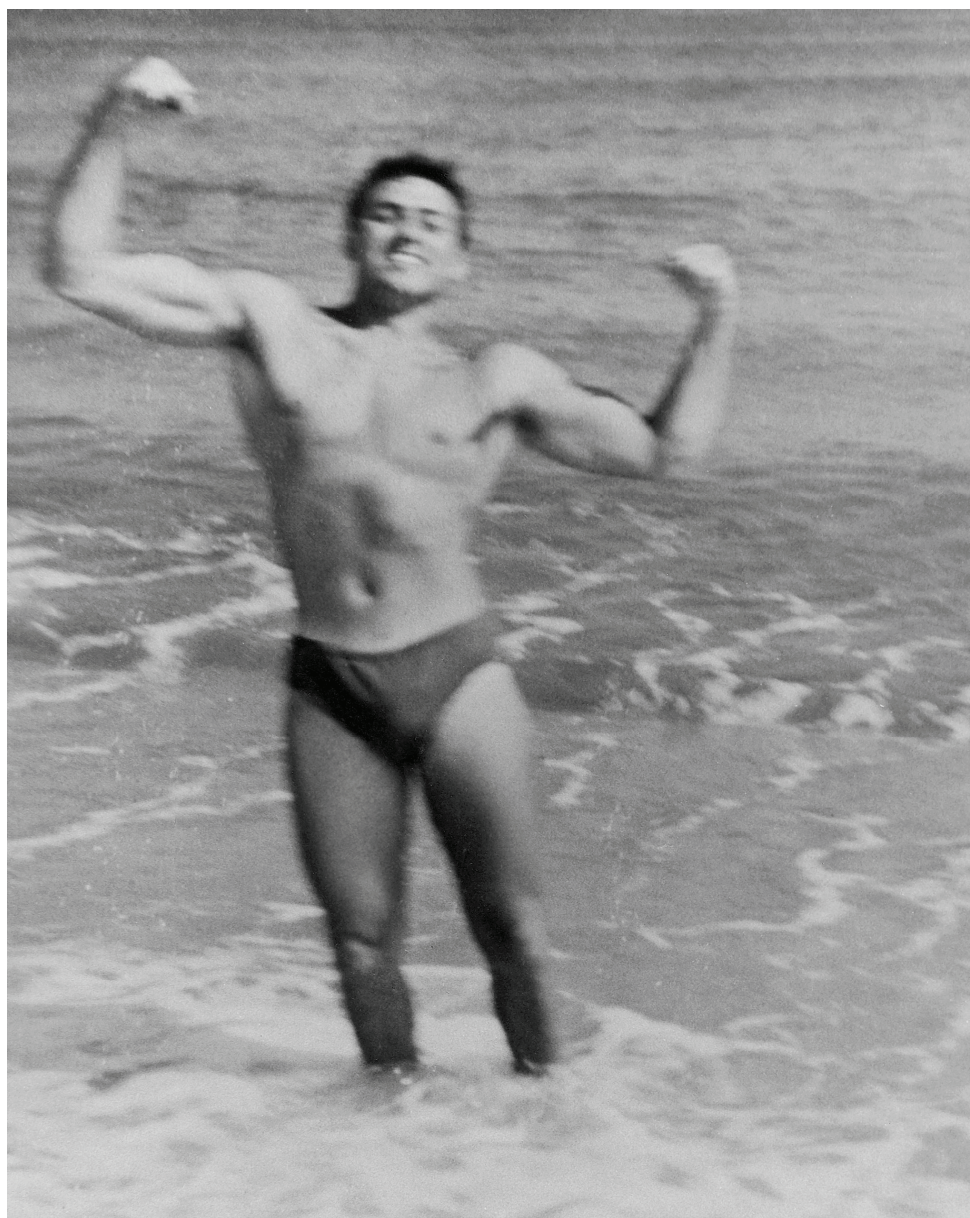
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I. 1 - Evaristo Fusar, *Silvio Berlusconi*. 1980



I. 2 - Silvio Berlusconi. Published in "Berlusconi tale e quale" no. 1, p. 6.



I.3 - Silvio Berlusconi. Published in "Berlusconi tale e quale" no. 2 p. 28.

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