

# **Five Moral Pieces**

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Umberto Eco

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TRANSLATED FROM THE ITALIAN

BY ALASTAIR MCEWEN

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## Introduction

The essays collected here have two things in common. They are, first, occasional pieces: pieces that sprang from talks given at conferences, articles on current affairs. And, despite the variety of their themes, they are all ethical in nature, that is to say, they treat of what we ought to do, what we ought not to do, and what we must not do at any cost.

Given their occasional nature, I should explain the circumstances in which they were written.

"Reflections on War" was published in *La Rivista dei libri*, 1 April 1991, at the time of the Gulf War.

"When the Other Appears on the Scene" is derived from an exchange of four letters with Cardinal Martini organized and published by *Liberal* magazine. The correspondence was then brought together in a slim volume, *Che cosa crede chi non crede?* (Rome: Atlante Editoriale, 1996). My text is a reply to a question the cardinal had put to me: "What is the basis of the certainty and necessity for moral action of those who, in order to establish the absolute nature of an ethic, do not intend to appeal to *metaphysical principles* or transcendental values, or even to universally valid *categorical imperatives*?" For the background to the debate the reader is referred to the volume in question, which also contains notes and contributions by Emanuele Severino, Manlio Sgalambro, Eugenio Scalfari, Indro Montanelli, Vittorio Foa, and Claudio Martelli.

"On the Press" was a paper presented in the course of a series of seminars organized by the Italian Senate (President Carlo Scognamiglio), before the members of the Senate and the editors of Italy's biggest dailies, with whom a wide-ranging discussion then followed. The text was subsequently published, by the Senate itself, in *Gli Incontri di studio a Palazzo Giustiniani: Stampa e mondo politico oggi* (Rome: Tipografia del Senato, 1995), a volume that also contains the addresses given by Scognamiglio, Eugenio Scalfari, Giulio Anselmi, Francesco Tabladini, Silvano Boroli, Walter Veltroni, Salvatore Carruba, Darko Bratina, Livio Caputo, and Paolo Mieli.

"Ur-Fascism" was a speech given in English at a symposium organized by the Italian and French departments of Columbia University, on 25 April 1995, in commemoration of the Liberation of Europe. It later appeared as "Ur-Fascism" in *The New York Review of Books* (22 June 1995) and was translated into Italian for the June-July 1995 number of *La Rivista dei libri* with the title "Totalitarismo *fuzzy* e Ur-Fascismo" (a version virtually the same as the one published here except for

a few minor modifications). However, it should be borne in mind that the text was conceived for an audience of American students and the speech was given in the days when America was still shaken by outrage over the Oklahoma city bombing and by the discovery of the fact (by no means a secret) that extreme right-wing military organizations existed in America. The anti-Fascist theme, therefore, too, on particular connotations in that context, and my historical observations were intended to stimulate reflection on current problems in various countries—the talk was then translated by newspapers and magazines into numerous other languages. Furthermore, the fact that the discourse was aimed at young Americans explains the presence of specific information on events that an Italian reader ought to know about already, such as the quotations from Roosevelt, the allusions to American anti-Fascism, and the emphasis on the encounter between Europeans and Americans at the time of the Liberation.

"Migration, Tolerance, and the Intolerable" is a collage. The first section contains the first part of a talk given on 23 January 1997 on the opening of the conference organized by the city of Valencia regarding prospects for the third millennium. The second is a translation and readaptation of the introduction to the International Forum on Intolerance, organized in Paris by the Académie Universelle des Cultures on 26 and 27 March 1997. The third, titled "Non chiediamoci per chi suona campana," was published by *La Repubblica* on the occasion of the sentencing of former SS officer Erich Priebke, accused of war crimes and tried before the Rome Military Tribunal.

# Reflections on War

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This article considers War with a capital W, as in "hot" war waged with the explicit consensus of nations, in the form it has assumed in the contemporary world. Since I will be submitting this piece just as Allied troops enter Kuwait City, it is probable—provided there are no surprises—that when people read it they will all feel that the Gulf War has led to a satisfactory outcome, because it is in conformity with the goals for which it was begun. In this case any talk of the impossibility or uselessness of war would seem like a contradiction: no one would be prepared to maintain that an undertaking that leads to a desired result is either useless or impossible. Yet the following reflections *must* hold no matter how things turn out. Indeed, they must hold a fortiori were the war to make it possible to attain "advantageous" results, precisely because this would convince everyone that war is still, in certain cases, a reasonable alternative. While one is always duty-bound to deny this.

Since the war began, we have heard or read various appeals criticizing "intellectuals" for not having adopted the proper stance with regard to this tragedy. Since the vocal majority that says or writes things like this is usually represented by intellectuals (in the strict sense of the term), one wonders about the makeup of the silent minority from whom a statement is required. Clearly the minority is composed of those who did not give a "correct" opinion on the matter when the time came to choose sides. Proof of this lies in the fact that, day after day, if someone puts forth an opinion contrary to the expectations of someone else, he or she is promptly labeled an intellectual traitor, a capitalist warmonger or a pro-Arab pacifist. The clash within the vocal majority as it emerged through the mass media ensured that each party deserved the other's accusations. Supporters of the ineluctable necessity of the conflict appeared to be interventionists of the old school; the pacifists, largely incapable of eschewing the slogans and rituals of past decades, unfailingly deserved to be accused of wishing for the surrender of one side in order to reward the belligerence of the other. In a form of ritual exorcism, those who supported the conflict were obliged to begin by stating how cruel war is, while those who were against it had to begin by stating how cruel Saddam is.

In each of these cases we have certainly witnessed a debate between professional intellectuals, but what we have not seen is the practice of the intellectual function. As we all know, intellectuals are a very nebulous thing as a category. But defining the "intellectual function" is a different matter. It consists of identifying critically what one considers a satisfactory approximation of one's own conception of truth—and this can be done by anybody, even by social misfits who reflect on their own condition and express it in some way, while it may be betrayed by writers who react emotionally to events, without subjecting themselves to the purification of thought.

This is why, as Vittorini put it, intellectuals must not "play the piper to revolution." Not in order to shirk the responsibility of a choice (which they can make as individuals), but because the moment of action requires the elimination of nuances and ambiguities (and this is the irreplaceable function of the "decision maker" in every institution), whereas the intellectual function lies in delving for ambiguities and bringing them to light. The first duty of the intellectual is to criticize his own traveling companions ("to think" means to play the voice of conscience). It may happen that the intellectual opts to keep silent because he fears betraying those with whom he identifies, thinking that despite their contingent errors, their goal is basically the maximum good for all.

A tragic decision, of which the history books are full, and for which some have gone to their death, in a struggle in which they did not believe, because they thought they could not trade loyalty for

truth. But loyalty is a moral category, while the truth is a theoretical one.

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It is not that the intellectual function is detached from morality. It is a moral decision when we put it into practice, just as it is a moral decision that prompts the surgeon to cut into living flesh in order to save a life. But when the time comes to cut, the surgeon must not yield to emotion, not even when he or she decides to close the incision because it is not worth carrying on with the operation. The intellectual function can also lead to emotionally unbearable results, *because at times some problems must be solved by demonstrating that they cannot be solved*. It is a moral decision to express one's own conclusion—or to remain silent about it (perhaps in the hope that it is mistaken). Such is the drama of those who, even momentarily, take on the task of playing the "representatives of mankind."

Many have waxed ironical, even in the Catholic world, about the position of the pope, who has said that we must not make war, who has prayed, and proposed solutions that seemed negligible in comparison with the complexity of events. In order to justify him, friends and enemies have concluded that the poor man was only doing his job, because he could hardly have said otherwise. That is right. The pope (from his own standpoint about the truth) exercised his intellectual function and said that we must not make war. The pope is obliged to say that, if we wish to follow the Gospels to the letter, we must turn the other cheek. But what am I to do if someone wants to kill me? "That's your lookout," the pope *ought* to say, "your problem"—and casuistry on self-defense would then come into play only with a view to making up for human frailties, which no one ought to feel obliged to provide a heroic defense of. The position is so impeccable that if (and when) the pope adds something else that can be understood as a practical suggestion, he abandons his own intellectual function and makes political decisions (and that's *his* problem).

If this is the case, it needs to be said that for the last forty-five years the intellectual community has not been silent on the problem of war. It has talked about it, and with such missionary commitment that the world's view of war has been radically modified. Never as on this occasion have people felt all the horror and ambiguity of what was happening. Apart from a few lunatics, no one had ideas in black and white. The fact that the war broke out all the same is a sign that the intellectuals' discourse has not been an unqualified success. It has not been sufficient, and has not been granted sufficient attention historically. But this is an accident. The modern world looks at war through eyes different from those with which it looked at the problem early in the twentieth century, and if someone were to talk today of the beauty of war as the only form of world hygiene, he would go down not in the annals of literature but in those of psychiatry. What has happened to war is what has happened to crimes of passion or the *lex talionis*: people still do these things, but the community now considers them to be evil, whereas it once judged them to be a good thing.

But these would still be moral and emotional reactions (and at times ethics itself can accept exceptions to the prohibition on killing, just as the collective sensibility can accept horrors and sacrifices that guarantee a greater good). There is a more radical way of thinking about war: in mere formal terms, in terms of internal consistency, by reflecting on its conditions of possibility—the conclusion being that you cannot make war because the existence of a society based on instant information, rapid transport, and continuous intercontinental migration, allied to the nature of the new technologies of war, has made war impossible and irrational. War is in contradiction with the very reasons for which it is waged.

Over the centuries, what has been the purpose of warfare? War was waged to defeat an adversary.

in order to benefit from his defeat, and in such a way that our intentions—to act in a certain manner, to attain a certain result—were tactically or strategically conceived with a view to making our adversary's intentions impracticable. To these ends it was necessary to field all the forces at our disposal. At the end of the day, the game was played out between us and our adversary. The neutrality of the others, the fact that our war did not bother them (and that to a certain extent it allowed them to profit from it), was a necessary condition for our freedom to maneuver. Not even Clausewitz's "total war" could escape these restrictions.

It is only in our century that the notion of "world war" was born, in other words a war capable of involving even societies without a history, like Polynesian tribal societies. The discovery of atomic energy, television, air transport, and the birth of various forms of multinational capitalism have resulted in some conditions that make war impossible.

1. Nuclear weapons have persuaded everybody that an atomic conflict would produce no winners and a sole loser—the planet. But after the realization dawned that atomic war is antiecological, the conviction grew that all wars are antiecological and cannot be otherwise. Anyone destroying forests with substances like Agent Orange (or polluting the sea) declares war not only on neutral powers but on the earth as a whole.

2. War is no longer waged on a front between two sides. The scandal of the American journalists in Baghdad is the same as the scandal, of far greater dimensions, of millions and millions of pro-Iraqi Muslims who live in the countries of the anti-Iraqi coalition. In the wars of the past, potential enemies were interned (or massacred), while compatriots who spoke in favor of the enemy's cause from enemy territory were usually hanged as soon as the war was over. But war can no longer be frontal, because of the very nature of multinational capitalism. That Iraq was armed by western industry is no accident. It falls within the logic of mature capitalism, which eludes the control of individual states. When the American government finds that the television companies are playing the enemy's game, it still thinks it is faced with a plot hatched by pro-Communist eggheads. In the same way, the television companies labor under the illusion that they are the impersonation of Humphrey Bogart, who has the corrupt gangster listen to the sound of the printing presses over the telephone as he says: "It's the press, old chum, and you can't stop it." But the logic of the news industry demands that it sell news, preferably dramatic news. It is not that the media refuse to play along with war: the media are merely a pianola performing a piece previously transcribed on its roll. In modern wars, therefore, everyone has the enemy behind the lines, something Clausewitz never could have accepted.

3. Even when the media are gagged, the new technologies of communication permit an unstoppable flow of information—and not even a dictator can prevent this, because such technologies make use of fundamental infrastructures that he cannot do without either. This flow of information assumes the role played in traditional wars by the secret services: it neutralizes every surprise action—and you cannot have a war in which it is

impossible to surprise the enemy. War produces a general exchange of intelligence with the enemy. But information does more: it continually allows the enemy to speak (while the aim of all wartime policy is to block enemy propaganda), and demoralizes the citizens of the contending parties with regard to their own government (while Clausewitz points out that a condition for victory is the moral cohesion of the combatant). Every war of the past was based on the principle that the citizens, believing it to be a just war, were anxious to destroy the enemy. Now information not only shakes the faith of the citizens, it also leaves them vulnerable when faced with the death of the enemy—no longer a distant and vague event but instead unbearable visual evidence.

4. All this interacts with the fact that, as Foucault put it, power is no longer monolithic and monocephalous: it is diffused, packeted, made of the continuous agglomeration and breaking down of consensus. War no longer pits two native lands one against the other. It puts a multiplicity of powers into competition with one another. In this game individual centers of power gain an advantage, but at the expense of the others. Whereas traditional war made fortunes for arms merchants, and this gain reduced the importance of the temporary suspension of some kinds of commerce, the new warfare, while it still enriches arms merchants, triggers a worldwide crisis for industries like air transport, entertainment and tourism, the media themselves (which lose out on advertising revenues), and the entire industry of the superfluous in general—the backbone of the system—from the construction market to car manufacturing. When news breaks of a war in progress, the stock market bounds upward, but one month later the same market makes a similar leap when the first signs of a possible peace begin to emerge. No "cynicism" in the first case, and no virtue in the second. The stock market records the oscillations in the play of powers. In war some economic powers find themselves in competition with others, and the logic of their conflict overwhelms that of national powers. While the industry of state consumption (such as armaments) needs tension, that of individual consumption needs happiness. The clash is played out in economic terms.

5. For all these and other reasons war no longer resembles, like the wars of the old days, a "serial" intelligent system, but rather a "parallel" intelligent system. A serial intelligent system, used for example to build machines capable of translating or drawing inferences from some given information, is instructed by the programmer so that it can make, on the basis of a finite number of rules, subsequent decisions, each of which depends on an assessment of the preceding decision, in accordance with a tree structure, made of a series of binary disjunctions. Old-fashioned military strategies went like this: if the enemy has moved his troops to the east, then perhaps he intends to proceed southward; I shall therefore move my troops in a northeasterly direction, to bar his way in a surprise move. The enemy's rules were our rules too, and each party made one decision at a time, as in a game of chess.



A parallel system, on the other hand, requires the individual cells of a network to assume a final configuration in accordance with a pattern of weights that the programmer cannot decide on or foresee beforehand, because the network finds rules that have not been received previously, modifies itself accordingly, and cannot distinguish between rules and data. True, a system of this kind (called a "neoconnectionist" or "neural network" system) can be controlled by comparing the given response with the expected response and adjusting the weights through successive experiments. But this requires (1) that the operator has the time, (2) that there are not two competing operators who redistribute the weights in a reciprocally contradictory fashion, and finally (3) that the individual cells of the network "think" as cells and not as operators—i.e., that they do not act on the basis of inferences made about the behavior of the operators, and above all that they do not have interests extraneous to the logic of the network itself. In a system in which power is packeted, every cell acts in accordance with its own interests, which are not those of the operator and have nothing to do with the autodynamic tendencies of the network. Consequently, if—albeit only metaphorically—war is a neoconnectionist system, it takes a path that is independent of the will of the two parties in contention. It is interesting how, in explaining the workings of a neural network, Arno Penzias (in *Come vivere in un mondo High-Tech*, Milano: Bompiani, 1989, [\[>\]](#)) uses a military metaphor:

It was known that individual neurons became electrically active ('they fired') if stimulated by their finely ramified input cables (called *den drites*). When it 'fires', a neuron emits electrical signals along a series of output cables (called *axons*) ... Since the 'firing' of each neuron depends on the activity of many others, there is no simple way of calculating what should happen or when. [...] According to the particular disposition of the synaptic connections, every simulation of a network of a hundred neurons defined its own set of possible states of equilibrium (out of a total of absolute possibilities of one thousand billion billion billions, or  $10^{30}$ ).

If war is a neoconnectionist system, it is no longer a phenomenon in which the calculations and intentions of the protagonists have any value. Owing to the multiplication of the powers in play, war distributes itself according to unpredictable patterns of weights. It may resolve itself in a way that is convenient for one of the opposing parties; but in principle, since it defies all decisional calculations it is lost for both parties. The operators' frenetic attempts to control the network, which receives contradictory impulses, will cause it to collapse. The most likely outcome of a war is "tilt." Old-fashioned wars were like a game of chess in which each player could try to take as many of his opponent's pieces as possible, but the ultimate goal was checkmate. Instead, contemporary warfare is like a chess game in which both players (working on the same network) move and take pieces of the same color. Modern warfare is therefore an autophagous game.

To state that a conflict has turned out to be advantageous for someone at a given moment implies an equation of that momentary advantage with the final advantage. There would be a final moment if war were still, as Clausewitz would have it, the continuation of policy by other means (hence the war would end when the situation reached a state of equilibrium sufficient to permit a return to politics). But in our century it is the politics of the postwar period that will always be the continuation (by any means) of the premises established by war. No matter how the war goes, by causing a general redistribution of weights that cannot correspond fully with the will of the contending parties, it will drag on in the form of a dramatic political, economic, and psychological instability for decades to come, something that can lead only to a politics "waged" as if it were warfare.

Have things ever been any different? Is it forbidden to think that Clausewitz was wrong? Historiography has reinterpreted Waterloo as a clash between two intelligences (because there was a result), but Stendhal interpreted it in terms of accident. To conclude that classic wars produced reasonable results—a final equilibrium—derives from a Hegelian prejudice, according to which history has a positive direction. There is no scientific (or logical) proof that the order of the Mediterranean after the Punic Wars, or that of Europe after the Napoleonic Wars, corresponded perforce with a state of equilibrium. It could have been a state of imbalance that would not have occurred had there been no war. The fact that for tens of thousands of years humanity has used warfare as a solution for states of disequilibrium has no more demonstrable value than the fact that in the same period humanity learned to resolve states of psychological imbalance by using alcohol or other equally devastating substances.

And this brings us to the notion of taboos. Moravia suggested that, since it took centuries for humanity to develop the incest taboo because of the realization that endogamy gave negative results, we have perhaps reached the point in which humanity has become aware of the need to proclaim war taboo. Realists have replied that a taboo is not "proclaimed" by moral or intellectual decree, it is formed over millennia in the obscure recesses of the collective consciousness (just as a neural network, in the end, can attain a state of equilibrium on its own). Of course, a taboo is not proclaimed; it proclaims itself. But the times required for growth are shortening. Becoming aware that mating with mothers or sisters hindered exchange between groups took thousands of years—it apparently took humanity ages to grasp the cause-and-effect relation between the sexual act and pregnancy. But it took us only two weeks to realize that airline companies close when war breaks out. It is therefore compatible with intellectual duty and with common sense to announce the necessity for a taboo, although no one has the authority to say that a certain time is required for its coming to maturity.

It is an intellectual duty to proclaim the inconceivability of war. Even if there were no alternative solutions. At most, to remind people that our century has known an *excellent* alternative to war, and that is "cold" war. In the end, history will have to admit that cold warfare, the source of horrors, injustices, intolerance, local conflicts, and widespread terror, has proved a very humane and mild solution in terms of casualties, and cold warfare can even boast victors and vanquished. But declaring cold wars is not a task for the intellectual.

What struck some as the silence of intellectuals about war was perhaps their fear of talking about it in the media in the heat of the moment, and this for the simple reason that the media are a part of war and its paraphernalia, and so it is dangerous to think of the media as neutral territory. Above all, the media work on a different time scale. The intellectual function is always exercised ahead of time (regarding what might happen) or with hindsight (regarding what has happened), seldom with regard

to what is actually happening, for reasons of rhythm, because events are always faster and more relentless than reflection on events can be. This is why Calvino's Baron Cosimo Piovasco di Rondo stayed up in his tree: not to shirk the intellectual duty to understand and to take part in his day and age, but to be able to understand and take part in it better.

However, even when it opts for tactical silence, in the end reflection on war requires that this silence must eventually be articulated. In complete awareness of the contradictions of a proclamation of silence, of the persuasive power of an act of impotence, and of the fact that the exercise of reflection exempts no one from the assumption of individual responsibility. But our first duty is to say that war today annuls all human initiative, and even its apparent purpose (and someone's apparent victory) cannot stop what has become the autonomous game of *weights* caught in their own net.

War cannot be justified, because—in terms of the rights of the species—it is worse than a crime. It is a waste.

# When the Other Appears on the Scene

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Dear Carlo Maria Martini,

Your letter has extricated me from one serious dilemma only to leave me on the horns of another that is equally awkward. Until now it has been up to me (through no decision of mine) to open the debate, and he who talks first inevitably puts his questions and invites the other to reply. My predicament springs from my feeling inquisitorial. And I very much appreciated the firmness and humility with which you, on three occasions, exploded the myth that would have us believe that Jesuits always answer a question with another question.

But now I am at a loss as to how to reply to your question, because my answer would be significant had I had a lay upbringing. But in fact I received a strongly Catholic education until (just to record the moment of the breach) the age of twenty-two. For me, the lay point of view was not a passively absorbed heritage, but rather the hard-won result of a long and slow process of change, and I always wonder whether some of my moral convictions do not still depend on religious impressions received early in my development. Now, in my maturity, I have seen (in a foreign Catholic university that also employs lay teaching staff, requiring of them no more than a manifestation of formal respect during religious-academic rituals) some of my colleagues take the sacraments without their believing in the Real Presence, and therefore without their having taken confession beforehand. With a tremor, after so many years, I felt once more the horror of sacrilege.

Nonetheless, I feel I can explain the foundations on which my "lay religiosity" rests—because I firmly hold that there are forms of religiosity, and therefore a sense of the Holy, of the Limit, of questioning and of awaiting, of communion with something that transcends us, even in the absence of faith in a personal and provident divinity. But, as I see from your letter, you know this too. What you are asking yourself is what is binding, captivating, and inalienable in these forms of ethic.

I should like to approach things in a roundabout way. Certain ethical problems became clearer to me on considering some problems in semantics—and please don't worry if some people say that we are talking in a complicated way: they might have been encouraged to think too simply by mass-media "revelations," predictable by definition. Let them instead learn to "think complicated," because neither the mystery nor the evidence is simple.

My problem hinged on the existence of "semantic universals," or in other words, elementary notions that are common to the entire human species and can be expressed in all languages. Not such an easy problem, given that many cultures do not recognize notions that strike us as obvious: for example, that of substance to which certain properties belong (as when we say that "the apple is red"), or that of identity ( $a = a$ ). However, I am convinced that there certainly are notions common to all cultures, and that they all refer to the position of our body in space.

We are erect animals, so it is tiring to stay upside down for long, and therefore we have a common notion of up and down, tending to favor the first over the second. Likewise, we have notions of right and left, of standing still and of walking, of standing up and lying down, of crawling and jumping, of waking and sleeping. Since we have limbs, we all know what it means to beat against a resistant material, to penetrate a soft or liquid substance, to crush, to drum, to pummel, to kick, and perhaps even to dance as well. The list is a long one, and could include seeing, hearing, eating or

drinking, swallowing or excreting. And certainly every human being has notions about the meaning of perceiving, recalling, feeling desire, fear, sorrow, relief, pleasure or pain, and of emitting sounds that express these things. Therefore (and we are already in the sphere of rights) there are universal concepts regarding constriction: we do not want anyone to prevent us from talking, seeing, listening, sleeping, swallowing, or excreting, or from going where we wish; we suffer if someone binds or segregates us, beats, wounds, or kills us, or subjects us to physical or psychological torture that diminishes or annuls our capacity to think.

Note that until now I have described only a sort of bestial and solitary Adam, who still knows nothing of sexual relations, the pleasures of dialogue, love for his offspring, or the pain of losing a loved one; but already in this phase, at least for *us* (if not for him or for her) this semantics has become the basis of an ethic: first and foremost we must respect the rights of the corporeality of others, which also include the right to talk and think. If our fellows had respected these "rights of the body," we would never have had the Slaughter of the Innocents, the Christians in the circus, Saint Bartholomew's Night, the burning of heretics, the death camps, censorship, child labor in mines, or the rapes in Bosnia.

But how is it that this marveling and ferocious beast that I have described immediately works out of his (or her) instinctive repertoire of universal notions and can reach the point where he understands not only that he wishes to do certain things and does not wish other things to be done to him, but also that he should not do to others what he does not wish to be done to him? Because, luckily, Eden is soon populated. The ethical dimension begins when the other appears on the scene. Every law, moral or juridical as it may be, regulates interpersonal relationships, including those with an other who imposes that law.

You too say that virtuous laypersons are persuaded that the other is within us. However, this is not a vague emotional inclination but a fundamental condition. As we are taught by the most secular of the human sciences, it is the other, it is his look, that defines and forms us. Just as we cannot live without eating or sleeping, we cannot understand who we are without the look and the response of the other. Even those who kill, rape, rob, or oppress do this in exceptional moments, but they spend the rest of their lives soliciting from their fellows approval, love, respect, and praise. And even from those they humiliate they ask the recognition of fear and submission. In the absence of this recognition, the newborn baby abandoned in the forest does not become humanized (or like Tarzan seeks at all costs the other in the face of an ape), and the result of living in a community in which everyone had decided systematically never to look at us, treating us as if we did not exist, would be madness or death.

Why is it then that there are or have been cultures that approve of massacre, cannibalism, or the humiliation of the bodies of others? Simply because such cultures restrict the concept of "others" to the tribal community (or the ethnic group) and consider "barbarians" to be nonhumans; but not even the Crusaders felt that unbelievers were fellowmen worthy of an excessive degree of love. The fact is that the recognition of the roles of others, the necessity to respect in them those requirements we consider essential for ourselves, is the product of thousands of years of development. Even the Christian commandment to love was enunciated, and laboriously accepted, only when the time was ripe.

But you ask me: Is this awareness of the importance of the other sufficient to provide us with an absolute basis, an immutable foundation for ethical behavior? It would suffice for me to reply that

even those things that you define as "absolute foundations" do not prevent many believers from knowingly sinning, and there the matter would end. The temptation of evil is present even in those who possess a well-founded and revealed notion of good. But I want to tell you two anecdotes, which gave me much to think about.

One concerns a writer, who describes himself as a Catholic, albeit of the sui generis variety, whose name I shall not give only because he told me what I am about to quote in the course of a private conversation, and I am not a talebearer. It was in the days of the papacy of John XXIII, and my elderly friend, in enthusiastically praising the pope's virtues, said (with clearly paradoxical intentions): "Pope John must be an atheist. Only a man who does not believe in God can love his fellowman so much!" Like all paradoxes, this one also contains a grain of truth: without troubling to consider the atheist (a type whose psychology eludes me, because, as Kant observed, I do not see how one can *not* believe in God, and hold that His existence can *not* be proved, and then firmly believe in the nonexistence of God, holding that this *can* be proved), it seems clear to me that a person who has never had any experience of the transcendent, or who has lost it, can make sense of his or her life and death, can be comforted by love for others, and by the attempt to guarantee someone else a life to be lived even after his or her own death. Of course, there are people who do not believe and nonetheless do not trouble to make sense of their own death, but there are also those who say they believe but who would be prepared to rip the heart out of a child in order to ward off death. The strength of an ethic is judged on the behavior of saints, not on the foolish *cujus deus venter est*.

This brings me to the second anecdote. I was still a sixteen-year-old Catholic boy when I happened to cross swords in a verbal duel with an older acquaintance who was a known "communist," in the sense in which the term was employed in the terrible fifties. And since he was provoking me, I asked him the decisive question: how could he, as a nonbeliever, make sense of that otherwise senseless event that was his own death? And he replied: "By asking before dying that I might have a civil funeral. And so I am no more, but I have set an example for others." I think that you too can admire the profound faith in the continuity of life, the absolute sense of duty that inspired his reply. And it is this sentiment that has induced many nonbelievers to die under torture rather than betray their friends, and others to catch the plague in order to look after plague victims. And sometimes it is also the only thing that drives a philosopher to philosophize, and a writer to write: to leave a message in the bottle, because in some way what we believe in, or what we think is beautiful, might be believed in or found beautiful by posterity.

Is this feeling really strong enough to justify an ethic as determined and inflexible, as solidly established as the ethic of those who believe in revealed morality, in the survival of the soul, in reward and punishment? I have tried to base the principles of a lay ethics on a natural reality (and, as such, in your view too, the result of a divine plan) like our corporeality and the idea that we instinctively know that we have a soul (or something that serves as such) only by virtue of the presence of others. It would appear that what I have defined as a "lay ethics" is at bottom a natural ethics, which not even believers deny. Is not the natural instinct, brought to the right level of maturity and self-awareness, a foundation offering sufficient guarantees? Of course we may think this an insufficient spur to virtue. "In any case," nonbelievers can say, "no one will know of the evil I am secretly doing." But those who do not believe think that no one is watching them from on high, and therefore they also know that—precisely for this reason—there is not even a Someone who may forgive. If such people know they have done ill, their solitude shall be without end, and their death desperate. They will opt, more than believers, for the purification of public confession, they will ask the forgiveness of others. This they

know, in the deepest part of their being, and therefore they know that they should forgive others first. Otherwise how could we explain that *remorse* is a feeling known to nonbelievers too?

I should not like to establish a clear-cut opposition between those who believe in a transcendent God and those who believe in no superindividual principle. I should like to point out that it was precisely ethics that inspired the title of Spinoza's great work, which begins with a definition of God as the cause of Himself. But Spinoza's divinity, as we well know, is neither transcendent nor personal, yet even the vision of a great and single cosmic *substance* in which one day we shall be reabsorbed can reveal a vision of tolerance and benevolence precisely because we are all interested in the equilibrium and harmony of this sole *substance*. This is so because we tend to think it impossible for this *substance* not to be in some way enhanced or deformed by the things we have done over the millennia. Thus I would also dare say (this is not a metaphysical hypothesis, it is merely a timid concession to the hope that never abandons us) that even from such a standpoint we could table the problem of some kind of life after death. Today the electronic universe suggests that sequences of messages can be transferred from one physical medium to another without losing their unique characteristics, and it seems that they can exist even as pure immaterial algorithms when, one medium having been abandoned, they are not transcribed again onto another. And who knows whether death, rather than an implosion, is not an explosion and the impressing, somewhere, among the vortices of the universe, of the software (which others call "soul") we have developed in life, made up of memories and personal remorse, and therefore of incurable suffering, or of a sense of peace for duty done, and love.

But you say that, without the example and the word of Christ, all lay ethics would lack a basic justification imbued with an ineluctable power of conviction. Why deprive laypersons of the right to avail themselves of the example of a forgiving Christ? Try, Carlo Maria Martini, for the good of the discussion and of the dialogue in which you believe, to accept even if only for a moment the idea that there is no God; that man appeared in the world out of a blunder on the part of a maladroit fate, delivered not only unto his mortal condition but also condemned to be aware of this, and for this reason the most imperfect of all creatures (if I may be permitted the echoes of Leopardi in this suggestion). This man, in order to find the courage to await death, would necessarily become a religious animal, and would aspire to the construction of narratives capable of providing him with an explanation and a model, an exemplary image. And among the many stories he imagines—some dazzling, some awe-inspiring, some pathetically comforting—in the fullness of time he has at a certain point the religious, moral, and poetic strength to conceive the model of Christ, of universal love, of forgiveness for enemies, of a life sacrificed that others may be saved. If I were a traveler from a distant galaxy and I found myself confronted with a species capable of proposing this model, I would be filled with admiration for such theogonic energy, and I would judge this wretched and vile species, which has committed so many horrors, redeemed were it only for the fact that it has managed to wish and to believe that all this is the *truth*.

You are now free to leave the hypothesis to others: but admit that even if Christ were only the subject of a great story, the fact that this story could have been imagined and desired by humans, creatures who know only that they do not know, would be just as miraculous (miraculously mysterious) as the son of a real God's being made flesh. This natural and worldly mystery would not cease to move and ennoble the hearts of those who do not believe.

This is why I believe that, on the fundamental points, a natural ethic—respected for the profound

religiosity that inspires it—can find common ground with the principles of an ethic founded on faith in transcendence, which cannot fail to recognize that natural principles have been carved into our hearts on the basis of a plan for salvation. If this leaves, as it certainly does, margins that may not overlap, it is no different from what happens when different religions encounter one another. And in conflicts of faith, *charity* and *prudence* must prevail.



# On the Press

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Senators,

What I am about to put before you is a *cahier de doléances* on the situation of the Italian press, especially with regard to its relations with the world of politics. I can do this in the presence of representatives of the press, and not behind their backs, because I have been saying what I intend to say here since the early sixties, mostly in the pages of Italian newspapers and weeklies. This means that we are living in a country where a free and unbiased press is able to put itself on trial.

The function of the fourth estate is certainly that of keeping a check on and criticizing the other three traditional estates (together with economic power and that represented by political parties and the labor unions), but it can do this in a free country because its criticism has no repressive function. The mass media can influence the political life of the country only by creating opinion. But the traditional powers cannot control or criticize the media other than through the media itself; otherwise their intervention becomes a sanction—either executive or legislative or judiciary—which can happen only if the media commit crimes, or appear to lead to the formation of political and institutional imbalance (see the debate on the *par conditio*, or equal-access law). But since the media, and in our case the press, cannot be exempt from criticism, it is a condition of health for a democratic country that the press put itself on the stand.

Yet this alone is frequently not enough. Indeed, it can constitute a good excuse, or, more specifically, a case of what Marcuse called "repressive tolerance." Once it has demonstrated its self-flagellatory impartiality, the press no longer feels any interest in reforming itself. About twenty years ago I was asked to write a long article criticizing *Espresso* magazine, which was published by *Espresso* itself. This may be excessive modesty on my part, but if *Espresso* subsequently took a turn for the better, it was thanks not to my article but to the natural evolution of things. As far as I recall, my criticisms made no difference.

In drawing up this *cahier de doléances* of mine, I do not intend to criticize the press in its relations with the world of politics as if the world of politics were an innocent victim of the abuses of the press. I maintain that politics bears full joint responsibility for the situation that I shall try to outline here.

I am not one of those provincial types for whom things go wrong only at home. Nor will I fall victim to the error of the Italian press, whose love of things foreign is such that whenever mention is made of a non-Italian daily the name of the publication is almost always preceded by the adjective "authoritative," to the point that all foreign evening newspapers are thus described even when they are fourth-rate rags. Most of the evils that afflict the Italian press today are common in almost all countries. But I shall make negative reference to other countries only when this is strictly necessary, because "two wrongs never make a right." And I shall take examples from other countries when it seems to me that they have a positive lesson for us.

One last specification: the texts I shall refer to are *La Repubblica*, the *Corriere della Sera*, and *Espresso*, and this is out of a spirit of fair play. These are publications I have written for or still write for, so my criticisms cannot be deemed preconceived or inspired by ill will. But the problems I shall try to throw light on regard the Italian press as a whole.

## The Polemics of the Sixties and Seventies

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In the sixties and seventies the polemic about the nature and function of the press hinged on these two themes: (1) the difference between news and commentary, and therefore the need for objectivity; (2) newspapers are instruments of power, run by political parties or economic groups, which use a deliberately cryptic language insofar as their real function is not to give news to the citizens but to send messages in code to another power group, passing over the heads of the readers. The language of politics was inspired by the same principles and the Italian expression "parallel convergences" has remained in the literature on mass media as a symbol of this language, which is barely comprehensible in the corridors of the Italian parliament but quite incomprehensible to the man in the street.

As we shall see, these two themes are largely obsolete. On the one hand there was an enormous polemic about objectivity, and many of us maintained that (apart from a bulletin giving rainfall statistics) there is no such thing as a really objective news item. Even if commentary and news are scrupulously separated, the very choice of the news item and its paging constitutes elements of implicit judgment. In recent decades so-called topicalization has been widely employed: the same page contains news items that are in some way connected. As an example of topicalization here is page [\[>\]](#) of *La Repubblica* of Sunday, 22 January 1955. Four articles: "Brescia—Woman Gives Birth and Lets Daughter Die"; "Rome—Four-Year-Old Left Alone at Home Found Playing on Windowsill, Father Winds Up in Prison"; "Rome—Even Women Who Do Not Wish to Keep Their Children Can Give Birth in a Hospital"; "Treviso—Divorced Mother Resigns as Mom." As you can see, the risk of abandoned children has been topicalized. The question we have to put ourselves is: Is this a problem typical of this period? Is there news of all the cases of this type? If it were only a matter of four cases the matter would be statistically irrelevant; but topicalization raises the news to what classical judiciary and deliberative rhetoric called an *exemplum*: a single case from which we take (or are surreptitiously invited to take) a rule. If four cases are dealt with, the newspaper leads us to think there are many more; if there were many more, the paper would not have told us. Topicalization does not merely provide four news items; it expresses a strong opinion on the situation of childhood, whatever the intentions of the editor who, perhaps in the small hours, made page [\[>\]](#) up that way because he or she did not know how to fill it. By this I am not saying that the technique of topicalization is mistaken or dangerous. All I am saying is that it shows us how opinions can be expressed in the giving of entirely objective news items.

As for the problem of cryptic language, I would say that the Italian press has abandoned this, because changes have also occurred in the language of politicians, who no longer read out obscure and elaborate phrases from a slip of paper into the microphones, but say *apertis verbis* that their colleague is a traitor to the group, while others brag vociferously about the erectile qualities of their reproductive organ.<sup>1</sup> In fact the press has fallen back on a language within the grasp of that magmatic entity known today as "folks," but it maintains that people talk only in clichés. Here therefore (I am using snippets of data collected by my students, who spent a month checking the Italian press for clichés) is a list of clichés taken from a single article in the *Corriere della Sera* of 11 January 1995: "Hope springs eternal," "We are in a face-off situation," "Dini announces blood and tears," "The President's office prepares to do battle," "The stable door has been closed after the horses have bolted," "Panella shoots point-blank," "Time is of the essence and there is no room for bellyachers," "The government has a long way to go," "We would have lost our battle," and "We are in dire straits."

In *La Repubblica* of 28 December 1994 we find that "We need to have our cake and eat it too," "Enough is enough," "May God protect me from my friends," "The Fininvest corporation takes the field once more," "The fat is in the fire," "There's just no help for it," "To cling like a leech," "The wind is changing," "Television takes the lion's share and leaves us the crumbs," "Let's get back on the right track," "The ratings have gone through the floor," "To lose the thread of the tale," "Keep an ear to the market," "Came out of it in bad shape," "The thorn in the side," "To render the honors of war"...It's not journalism, it's hackwork. All things considered, one wonders whether these clichés are more or less transparent than our "parallel convergences," the meaning of which the Red Brigades at least understood and acted upon accordingly.

Note that of these commonplaces, good for the "folks," half came from the writers of the article and half from politicians' quotes. As you can see, to use another platitude, "the net is closing in," and we are focusing on a diabolical alliance in which we do not know who are the corrupt and who the corrupters.

We have reached the end, therefore, of the hoary debate on objectivity and cryptic language. New problems are appearing. What are they and how did they come into being?

## **The Daily Becomes a Weekly**

In the sixties, newspapers were not as yet suffering from the competition of television. But Achille Campanile, during a conference on television held in Grosseto in September 1962, was struck by a brilliant intuition. At one time the papers were the first to give a piece of news, then other publications stepped in and took the story further; the newspaper was a telegram that finished with "Letter follows." By 1962, the telegraphic news item was given at eight in the evening by the television news. The next day's newspaper ran the same news item: it was a letter that ended with "Telegram follows, or rather, precedes."

Why was a comic genius like Campanile the only one to notice this paradoxical situation? Because at that time Italian television was limited to one or two channels considered to be under the control of the government, and therefore it was not considered (and largely was not) a reliable source. The newspapers had more to say, and it was said less vaguely. Comedians sprang from the cinema or the clubs, and they did not always make it onto television; political communication took place on the hustings, face to face, or through posters on walls. A study of televised political rallies, made in the sixties, established through an analysis of numerous party broadcasts that, in an attempt to tailor his proposals to the average television viewer, the representative of the Communist Party ended up saying things that were very similar to the remarks made by the representative of the Christian Democratic Party—that is, any differences were all but ironed out as each politician tried to appear as neutral and reassuring as possible. Therefore the polemics, the political struggle, took place elsewhere, and most of all in the newspapers.

Then came the quantitative (the number of channels grew more and more) and qualitative leap; even within the bosom of the national television network there were three separate channels, each with a different political orientation. Satire, the heated debate, and the scoop factory became the province of television, which even broke down the sex taboo, so that some programs broadcast at eleven in the evening were far bolder than the monastic covers of magazines like *Espresso* or *Panorama*, which

stopped just north of the gluteus maximus. Still in the early sixties, I recall publishing a review of American talk shows, seen as the loci of civilized, witty conversation capable of keeping viewers glued to the screen until late at night, and I made an impassioned appeal that the format be adopted by Italian television. Thereafter, talk shows assumed a more and more triumphal presence on Italian TV screens, but not only did they encourage a decidedly forthright language (and, to tell the truth, a development of this kind occurred at least in part in the talk shows of other countries), they soon became the scene of violent clashes, occasionally even physical ones.

So television became the primary source of the diffusion of news, and this left the dailies with only two options. As for the first of these possible courses (which I define for now only as "broadened attention") I shall have more to say later, but I think it can be said that most of the daily papers took the second way: they took on the features of weeklies. Daily papers have become more and more like weeklies, devoting an enormous amount of space to variety, society, political gossip, and the world of entertainment in general. This has sparked a crisis for the quality weeklies (in Italy these were *Panorama*, *Epoca*, *Europeo*, and *Espresso*), which has left them with two alternatives: either to take on the characteristics of monthlies (but by now there are specialist monthlies—on yachting, watches, cookery, computers—with their own loyal and certain market) or to invade the field of gossip that previously belonged, and still does, to the middlebrow weeklies, *Gente* or *Oggi* for fans of royal weddings, or lowbrow products like *Novella 2000*, *Stop*, and *Eva Express* for devotees of the extramarital affairs of showbiz personalities and hunters of breasts bared in the intimacy of the bathroom.

But quality weeklies can descend to the low or middle bracket too, which they do in their closing pages—it is toward the end of the magazine that you find the boobs, the affectionate friendships, and the nuptials. However, by doing this they lose the physiognomy of their own readership; the closer a quality weekly gets to the middle or low bracket, the more it acquires a readership that is not its traditional one. It no longer knows whom it is addressing, and a crisis sets in; circulation goes up, but the magazine loses its identity. On the other hand, weeklies have been dealt a lethal blow by the weekly supplements issued by the dailies. There is only one solution for weeklies—to follow in the footsteps of those quality publications, like the *New Yorker*, which offer lists of shows, sophisticated cartoons, brief anthologies of poetry, and even lengthy pieces of up to fifty pages on the life of a doyen of American publishing like Helen Wolff. An alternative would be to follow *Time* or *Newsweek* which accept being weeklies that talk about events already dealt with by the dailies and the television but cover these events with concise summaries or in-depth dossiers written by teams of journalists, each of which requires months of planning and work, not to mention documentation so excruciatingly meticulous that these weeklies seldom have to publish letters of rebuttal regarding matters of fact. But even an article for the *New Yorker* is commissioned months beforehand, and then if it is judged unsuitable, the author is paid just the same (and paid very well) and the article is thrown away. This type of weekly has extremely high costs and can exist only for a global English-speaking market, not for a limited Italian-speaking market in which readership figures are still discouraging.

Consequently weeklies are obliged to pursue dailies, along the same road, and each one tries to outdo the other to win over the same readers. This explains why the glorious *Europeo* is closing, *Epoca* is trying desperately to find an alternative route by maintaining itself with television launches while *Espresso* and *Panorama* are struggling to differentiate themselves. They are different, but the public is less and less aware of this. I frequently meet acquaintances, cultivated ones too, who compliment me on the fine weekly column I write for *Panorama*, and, they assure me with adulation,

they buy *Panorama* and only *Panorama* in order to read my column—which, by the way, appears in *Espresso* and not in *Panorama*.

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## The Ideology of Entertainment

And the dailies? To look like weeklies they increase the number of pages, to increase them they battle for more advertisers, to accommodate more ads they make further increases in the number of pages and invent the supplements; to fill all those pages they have to find something to talk about, and to do that they must go beyond straight news items (which, moreover, have already been ceded to television), and so they take on more and more features typical of weeklies, transforming what is not news into news.

One example. Some months ago, on receiving a prize at Grinzane, I was introduced by my colleague and friend Gianni Vattimo. Those who have an interest in philosophy know that my standpoint is different from Vattimo's, and that nonetheless we respect each other. Others know that we have been close friends since our youth, and enjoy ribbing each other on every convivial occasion. That day Vattimo had opted to go the convivial route. He made an affectionate and witty introduction and I responded in an equally playful fashion, emphasizing with witticisms and paradoxes our perennial differences of opinion. The following day an Italian newspaper devoted an entire page in its arts section to the clash at Grinzane that supposedly marked, according to the columnist, the birth of a new and dramatic rift in Italian philosophy. The author of the article knew perfectly well that this was not news, not even arts news. He had simply *created a story* that did not exist. I leave it to the reader to find equivalent examples in the political field. But the arts example is an interesting one: the newspaper had to construct a story because it had to fill too many pages devoted to the arts, variety, and society, pages dominated by the ideology of entertainment.

Now let's take a look at the *Corriere* (44 pages) and *La Repubblica* (54 pages) of Monday, 23 January 1995. As the pages of the *Corriere* are more closely written, the quantity of material is the same. Monday is a difficult day because there is no fresh political or economic news, and that leaves sports news at most. That day, we were in the middle of a government crisis in Italy, so our dailies could dedicate their lead articles to the duel between Lamberto Dini and Silvio Berlusconi. A massacre in Israel on "Auschwitz Day" made it possible to fill most of the front page, with the addition of the Andreotti affair and, for the *Corriere*, the death of Rose Kennedy. There was also some news from Chechnya. How to fill up the remaining pages? The two newspapers devoted, respectively 7 and 4 pages to local news, 14 and 7 pages to sports, 2 and 3 pages to the arts, 2 and 5 pages to the economy, and from 8 to 9 pages to items on society, entertainment, and television. In both papers, out of 32 pages at least 15 were devoted to articles typical of weeklies.

Now let's take the *New York Times* of the same Monday. Out of 53 pages, 16 dealt with sports, 16 with metropolitan problems, and 10 with the economy. That left 17 pages. There was no crisis in progress in the States, and Washington did not require much space, so that the 5 pages of the "Nation Report" dealt with internal affairs. Then, after the massacre in Israel, I found at least ten articles on Peru, Haiti, Cuban refugees, Rwanda, Bosnia, Algeria, an international conference on poverty, Japan in the aftermath of the earthquake, and the case of Bishop Gaillot. There followed two pages of close written commentary and political analyses.

The two Italian papers did not mention Peru, Haiti, Cuba, or Rwanda. And even if we admit that ~~the first three interest Americans more than Europeans, in any case it is clear that there were stories~~ concerning international current affairs that the Italian papers dropped in order to increase the section devoted to entertainment and television. The *New York Times* devoted two pages to media business because it was Monday, but this was composed of reflections and economic analyses of the industry rather than of gossip about show business personalities.

## Dailies and TV

By now the Italian press is a slave to television. It is TV that sets, as they say, the agenda of the press. There is no press in the world where television news ends up on the front page, unless Clinton or Mitterrand made a televised address the previous evening, or the CEO of a national network was fired.

And don't tell me that the pages have to be filled somehow. Take the *New York Times* of Sunday 22 January. All in all there were 569 pages, including ads, the Book Review, the weekly variety section, travel, automobiles, etc. Let's take a look at the part where they talk about television—which is undoubtedly a domestic appliance that occupies a lot of space in the American collective imagination. Television is dealt with on page [\[>\]](#) of the arts and entertainment supplement, where there is a thoughtful piece on racial stereotypes in the programs, and a long review of a fine documentary on volcanoes. Then, obviously, there is the program guide, but the topic of television does not reappear even in the people-and-variety supplement. So it's not true that it is necessary to talk about television in order to fill pages and interest the public. It is a choice, not a necessity. On that same day the Italian press devoted a good deal of space to a program hosted by TV comic Piero Chiambretti (which had not yet been broadcast, and was therefore getting free publicity), in which the central news was that Chiambretti and his camera team had tried to get into the university lecture hall where I was holding a lesson, and I—out of respect for the place and its function—denied him permission to do so. If this was news (because it really would be news if some sanctuary were to remain televisually virgin), it was news worth no more than a couple of lines.

And what if some politician, TV cameras at the ready, had knocked on the door of that lecture hall, and I had requested him to desist? Without entering the hall, and without appearing on television, he would have ended up on the front pages of the papers. In Italy, politicians set the agenda of journalistic priorities by stating something on television (even by letting it be known that such a statement is to be made), and on the following day the press does not talk of events that actually occurred in the country, but rather of what was said about them or could have been said about them on television. Would that that were all, because there is no doubt that a provocative remark made by a politician on TV has by now taken the place of a formal press conference. The fact is, among political news items, Italian newspapers also give front-page space to a bout of face slapping between a gossip columnist and an art critic.

Italy is certainly the country in which, more than any other, the life of television is closely bound up with political life, otherwise there would be no debate about *par condicio*, and this was the case even in the days of Bernabei,<sup>2</sup> before Fininvest<sup>3</sup> appeared on the horizon. The press, therefore, has to account for this bond. A foreign friend drew my attention to the fact that, on Sunday, 29 January 1990, *La Re-pubblica* (front page and page [\[>\]](#)) and the *Corriere* (page [\[>\]](#)) both ran a story over several columns on Piero Chiambretti's historic announcement: "I'm not quitting" (and this only because TV

journalist Michele Santoro had made a provocative statement about the matter the previous day). Certainly, the career decisions of a comic should not be front-page news, especially if the comic in question has decided *not* to quit his program. If news is man bites dog and not dog bites man, then this was a case of dog that apparently had not bitten anyone. However, we all know that behind that debate, which also involved Enzo Biagi,<sup>4</sup> there lurked a feeling of unease, a polemic with a markedly political flavor. We ought to say that the press was obliged to put it on the front page, out of no fault of its own but as a result of the Italian situation. Yet I would suggest that the Italian situation is what it is partly because of the press.

Well before these events, the press, in order to attract the television public, had set up television as the preferred political space, thus publicizing its own natural competitor beyond all measure. Politicians put two and two together: they chose television and adopted its ways and its language, certain that only by so doing would they attract the attention of the press.

The press has politicized entertainment to an undue extent. So it was an obvious move for a politician to try to get himself noticed by taking the porn star Cicciolina into parliament; and the case of Cicciolina is a typical one because, out of instinctive prudery, television had not given the porn star the space that the press immediately gave her.

## The Interview

While it depends on TV for its agenda, the press has also decided to emulate TV style. The most typical way of giving any kind of news—political, literary, scientific—has become the interview. The interview is obligatory in TV, where you cannot talk about people without showing them, but it is an instrument that the press once used with great parsimony. Interviewing people means giving your space to them in order to let them say what *they* want. All we need do is think of what happens when an author publishes a book. Readers expect the press to provide a judgment and an orientation, and they trust the opinion of a well-known critic or the good name of the publication. But today a newspaper is considered a failure if it fails to run an interview with the author in question. What is an interview with the author? Inevitably, self-promotion. It is exceedingly rare for an author to say that he or she has written a disgraceful book. The norm is an implicit form of blackmail (and I would point out that this happens in other countries too): "If you don't grant the interview, we won't even run a review." But then the newspaper, content with the interview, frequently forgets the review. In any case the reader has been defrauded; publicity has taken precedence over or even replaced critical judgment and often critics, when they finally write something, no longer discuss the book, but rather what the author had to say about it in the course of various interviews.

There is all the more reason for an interview with a politician to be an act of a certain importance: either it is sought by the politician, who wants to use the newspaper as a vehicle—and it is up to the newspaper to decide whether to grant this space or not—or it is sought by the newspaper, which wants to delve further into a certain position adopted by the politician. A significant interview has to take a lot of time, and the interviewee (as happens in virtually all the world) then has to see the quotes, in order to avoid misunderstandings or rebuttals. Today, the newspapers serve up about a dozen interviews a day in which interviewees say what they have already said to other newspapers; but in order to beat the competition, the interview for newspaper A has to be spicier than the one given to newspaper B. The game, therefore, is to wring from the politician a half admission that, artfully

emphasized, will trigger a scandal.

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So is the politician, on the scene again the following day to retract his statements of the day before, a victim of the press? Then we ought to say to him: "Why do you play along, instead of adopting the efficacious technique of *no comment*?" A few months ago it appeared that Umberto Bossi had chosen this path when he forbade his group in parliament to talk to journalists. A losing strategy, because it exposed him to attacks from the press? A winning strategy, because it won him at least two days of full-page articles in all the papers? Parliamentary journalists say that in most cases of statements followed by virulent rebuttals, it is the politician who has really made that half statement, precisely because the newspapers would publish it, providing them with an opportunity to deny it the following day, having in the meantime launched a *ballon d'essai*, and having successfully hit home with an insinuation or a threat. Upon which one feels like asking the parliamentary journalist, victim of the astute politician: "Why do you play along, why don't you demand that politicians check and endorse the quotes?"

The answer is simple. In this game each party has something to gain and nothing to lose. It is a game played at a dizzying pace, with statements following one another day after day. The result is that the reader loses count and forgets what has been said. By way of compensation the newspaper runs the story with a screaming headline, and the politician cashes in on the situation according to plan. It is a *pactum sceleris* at the expense of the reader and the citizen. But like all crime, in the end it doesn't pay: the price, both for the press and the politician, is unreliability and a "who cares?" reaction from the man on the street.

Interviews have been made more appetizing by the arrival, as we mentioned before, of a radical change in political language, which, by adopting the style of TV debates and TV donnybrooks, is no longer circumspect, but rather picturesque and immediate. For a long time we complained about Italian politicians and their habit of reading out frugal and obscure statements from a slip of paper, and how we admired those American politicians who seemed to speak off the cuff into the microphones, even managing to slip in a few witty quips. Well, in reality things were quite different. Most of them had taken courses in the various "speech centers" of American universities; they followed and still follow the rules of a public-speaking technique that is apparently improvised, but actually regulated with inch-perfect precision. Apart from gaffes, their remarks were and still are taken from special handbooks, or prepared at night by teams of ghostwriters.

Having shrugged off the ornate style of public speaking in the First Republic, the politicians of Italy's Second Republic really do improvise. They talk in a way that is often more comprehensible but frequently unrestrained. Needless to say, for the newspapers, especially if they need to adopt the style of a weekly, all this is manna from heaven. If I may be forgiven an irreverent comparison, this is a typical barroom psychological ploy: someone has one too many and says something incautious, and the entire company does its best to egg him on until he goes clear over the top. This is the dynamic of provocation typical of talk shows, and it also applies to relations between politicians and journalists. Half the phenomena that we now define as the "embitterment of the political struggle" spring from this uncontrollable dynamic. Of course, as I said before, in the dizzying succession of news items, readers forget the specific statement. What lingers on to affect social mores is the tone of the debate, the conviction that anything goes.



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