

## **The myth of the treacherous *yogin*.**

### **Unrestrained power and deception in the parable of Silvio Berlusconi.**

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Images have become our true sex object.  
(Jean Baudrillard *Ecstasy* 35)

#### ***Abstract***

*L'articolo prende spunto dal perpetuarsi dell'immaginario religioso nell'agone politico dell'Italia contemporanea. Nel caso specifico, l'affermarsi del Berlusconismo e il moltiplicarsi di una serie di agiografie – spesso auto-promosse – sull'ex-presidente del consiglio dei ministri Silvio Berlusconi sono qui discussi come un culto della personalità che nel corso di due decenni ha favorito il moltiplicarsi di processi egemonici in seno alla società italiana. La critica qui condotta trae spunto da due testi critici radicalmente diversi per orientamento ed epoca storica ma sorprendentemente affini a livello pragmatico: gli Śiva-sūtra di Vasugupta e La Société du spectacle di Guy Debord.*

*La politica promossa da Berlusconi negli ultimi vent'anni è stata presentata ossessivamente come un fattore unificante (in questo senso yoga) ma alla fine si è rivelata una forma di potere incontrollato che ha nuociuto tanto al suo artefice quanto alle sue vittime. Traendo ispirazione dalla teoria e pratica dello yoga e dalla devastante critica sociale di Debord, le implicazioni culturali della parabola Berlusconiana sono qui discusse come l'apoteosi della mancanza di controllo del potere e l'origine dell'ignoranza. L'articolo conclude con una valutazione dello yoga come strumento per una visione rivoluzionaria contro ogni totalitarismo.*

***Parole chiave: Silvio Berlusconi, Śiva-sūtra, The Society of the Spectacle, Yoga, myth, subalternity.***

On November, 16<sup>th</sup> 2011, following a series of sex scandals (including the accusation of soliciting minors for sex) and a charge for malfeasance in office, Mr Silvio Berlusconi resigned as Prime Minister of Italy. In fact Berlusconi failed to meet most of his pre-election promises and proved unable to tackle Italy's debt crisis. After Berlusconi's resignation, an interim government has been formed by Prof Mario Monti (former European Commissioner and Rector and President of Bocconi University in Milan) with the purpose of restoring credibility to Italy, and to strengthen its collapsed economy. Next general elections are scheduled on March 2013. Out of his «sense of responsibility», Mr Berlusconi has announced he will run again for the position of Prime Minister (BBC News 2012).

Regardless the outcomes of the forthcoming elections, and despite the fact that Berlusconi is internationally discredited as a statesman, there is the perception that only sex

scandals (cf. Messia 2011) have had the power to reveal the dangerous one-man myth built by means of a treacherous propaganda, self-martyrization and the promotion of a culture of ignorance, arrogance and discrimination. The relentlessness of Mr Berlusconi thus prompts an analysis of the concept of «legitimate power» and the way mythological narratives are created and adjusted to validate the origin and perpetuation of uneven development. In addressing such issues, this article intends to promote alternative philosophy as a legitimate frame for larger political and social analyses.

It is no novelty that religious discourses and religious imagery intersect with politics on a number of levels, and that they have been used by politicians – with the more or less tacit agreement of religious authorities – to disseminate and validate a number of convoluted practices of control. A study of Mr Berlusconi's politics and narratives allows a deeper inquiry into ways power and consent are created, negotiated and transmitted, eventually constructing myth and reinforcing mimetic desire. I thus propose a comparative exegetical exercise based on the reading of two different, yet structurally similar, texts: the *Śiva-sūtras* (the aphorisms revealed by the god Śiva to the sage Vasugupta), and Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* (*La Société du spectacle*, the manifesto of Situationist International originally published in 1967).<sup>1</sup> Though operating in different contexts and epochs, both texts (henceforth ŚS and SoS) are now «scriptures», and for some are dogmatic in nature.

My analysis will focus on their overt critique of the material world as a reality constructed on egomaniac processes and implemented by consumerism and ignorance. In particular, politics is examined as *yoga*, a system that «implies physical training, exertion of will power and acts of decision, because it wants to deal with the complete human situation and provide real freedom, not just a theory of liberation.» (Klostermaier 1994: 402) Likewise, Situationist International:

was ruled by a sort of collective responsibility, according to which individual theoretical statements and behaviors automatically involved everyone else. This feature, similar to one of the aspects of religious sects, has in the case of the SI an aesthetic meaning, referring to the importance of the constraining and binding element of style; as Nietzsche writes, it implies the erasure of individual specificity, a deep sense of discipline and a repugnance for a disorganized and chaotic nature.

(Perniola 1999, p. 92)

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<sup>1</sup> The text is available online from Situationist International Archive and Marxist Internet Archive.

Berlusconism, conversely – though loudly advertised as adhering to similar coordinates – is in fact the place of non-politics, the saturnalia of power and the epitome of self-mimetic desire. In short, it is the total performance of ignorance (*avidya*) and the channel for the perpetuation of illusion (*māyā*) – or, in Debordian terms, «falsification.»<sup>2</sup>

The logic behind the construction of power through religious discourses and religious consent is thus shown as a *sādhana* (practice)<sup>3</sup> inevitably leading to the disclosure of the deception enforced by the *sādhaka* (practitioner). Political emancipation, either yogic enlightenment or social liberation, can be achieved only by showing the obscenity of the spectacle, the dynamics of control it exerts and its genesis.

### *Dangerous liaisons, or tales of the despicable sādhaka*

The union of the elements, the separation of the elements and the union of the universe.

ŚS 1: 21

Separation is the alpha and omega of the spectacle. [...] Thus power as a separate realm has always had a spectacular aspect, but mass allegiance to frozen religious imagery was originally a shared acknowledgment of loss [...].

SoS 25

Silvio Berlusconi, the most prominent Italian tycoon, seized his moment in 1993. After the political turmoil that followed major political scandals and the end of the so-called First Republic, he founded his party, Forza Italia (lit. «Go Italy!»), and on March 1994 he won general elections becoming Prime Minister. Too many failed to acknowledge that

<sup>2</sup> Cf. the coming together of state, media and capital as the origin of falsehood in Tapie's France and Berlusconi's Italy (Hussey 2010, pp. 66-67).

<sup>3</sup> Among its many meanings, *sādhana* is any performance «leading straight to a goal»; «the act of mastering, overpowering, subduing» or «accomplishment, fulfilment, completion, perfection» (Monier Williams 1995, p. 1201).

Berlusconi's newly acquired parliamentary immunity actually saved him from pending trials and further judicial inquiries. After the 1994 success, Berlusconi – at the head of a coalition that through the years grouped former Christian Democrats, socialists, nationalists, conservatives, theo-dems, neo- and post-Fascists, northern and southern secessionists, founded La Casa delle Libertà (lit. «The House of Freedoms») and won elections again in 2001 and in 2008, thus confirming an unprecedented consensus.<sup>4</sup>

Left alone by an overtly inefficacious parliamentary opposition, extra-parliamentary movements (mainly leftists), civic committees and Italian non-aligned and oppositional press have increasingly challenged Berlusconi's power, especially during the last mandate (2008-2011).<sup>5</sup> Even the tacit support given to Berlusconi's government by Catholic media and clerical authorities started to tremble vis-à-vis an internationally perceived decline in the praxis (including its ethical and moral connotations) of the Italian former PM.

Although the public was aware of a disturbingly extensive list of past and present trials and allegations, <sup>6</sup> it was Mr Berlusconi's insatiable sexual appetites for young girls, his possible relation with minors, his alleged fondness for orgies and a plan for securing seats in the EU parliament to young women with no political expertise and on mere attractiveness criteria that caused the greatest outrage. Italians were shocked to learn that Berlusconi repeatedly used state flights to bring in his Sardinian villa friends, pop-singers, showgirls and models for private parties while his Roman residence of Palazzo Grazioli was an open harbour for prostitutes who were entertained on the king size bed courtesy of Mr Vladimir

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<sup>4</sup> Mr Berlusconi is the third longest-serving PM since the Unification of Italy (1861), after Benito Mussolini (1925-1943) and Giovanni Giolitti (five times in office from 1892 and 1921).

<sup>5</sup> For a quantitative analysis of Berlusconi approval rating and its decline, see Roncarolo 2005, pp. 86-88.

<sup>6</sup> Amongst these, conflict of interests, accusations of corruption, abuse of office, embezzlement, tax fraud, false accounting, false testimony, illegal financing of a political party and external relationship in mafia association. The most accessible online source listing Mr Berlusconi's extensive record of criminal allegations, trials and their status can be retrieved from the following link:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trials\\_and\\_allegations\\_involving\\_Silvio\\_Berlusconi](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trials_and_allegations_involving_Silvio_Berlusconi)

Putin. The words of Mrs Veronica Lario, Berlusconi's former second wife, contributed to move the people, especially women. While publicly announcing divorce, Mrs Lario declared that her husband «is not well» and entertains minors. Mrs Lario's open letter to *La Repubblica* – one of the most influential opposition newspapers – caused outraged reactions (Lario 2007). Not only, and predictably, from Italian opposition parties. Also from ecclesiastic authorities, Catholic media and the international press.

Members and sympathisers of La Casa delle Libertà loudly backed-up Berlusconi by attacking *Famiglia Cristiana* (a popular Italian Catholic magazine) and its editor, don Antonio Sciortino, who wrote that the position of Mr Berlusconi was «unjustifiable», and who urged the Church to adopt a more radical position. *Avvenire*, the newspaper of CEI (the Italian Episcopal Conference) was also harshly criticised. After the publication of a series of columns commenting on the morally questionable private life of the Italian PM, *Il Giornale* – a major newspaper belonging to Silvio Berlusconi and then sold in 1994 to his brother Paolo – attacked Mr Dino Boffo, editor-in-chief of *Avvenire*, with a discredit campaign built on false allegations.<sup>7</sup> This episode led to an immediate reply from ecclesiastic authorities, including a Vatican official note stating that Pope Benedict XVI deplors the unjust and injurious attacks circulating in the media against the former editor of the Italian Bishops' Conference daily newspaper.

The crisis between the Vatican and the Italian PM intensified following further shocking news. Berlusconi had been accused of hiring dozens of prostitutes (one of them a minor) and of malfeasance in office (*concussione*). Archbishop Tarcisio Bertone, the Vatican's Secretary of State and Camerlengo, and formerly Secretary of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, released an official note in which he said that: «The Church pushes and invites everyone, above all those who hold public responsibility in any administrative, political and judicial area, to be committed to a more robust morality, a sense of justice and lawfulness.» (Willey 2011)

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<sup>7</sup> Vittorio Feltri, editor of *Il Giornale*, reported of a plea bargain accepted in court by Mr Boffo in 2002 after being accused of harassing a woman, and exposed him as a homosexual. Mr Boffo resigned due to the devastating effects of the defamation campaign on his family. The resignation was emphatically reported on *Il Giornale* and presented as a victory. On March, 4<sup>th</sup> 2009, Feltri publicly recanted his accusations. The Italian Journalists Professional Organisation suspended him for six months (then reduced to three).

The moral question within Italian institutions during Berlusconi's government must be contextualised in an increasingly worrying scenario. Amongst the most significant factors: an escalation of cases of corruption among members of La Casa delle Libertà, an unprecedented economic crisis, massive unemployment, questionable cuts to research and public education sectors, the raise of security issues on ethnic/faith grounds,<sup>8</sup> the increasing brutality of Police forces to repress strikes and manifestations, the rise of homophobia, the lack of state help to the 2009 earthquake survivors in Abruzzo, a growing discontent for the Italian participation to the occupation of sovereign countries such as Afghanistan and Iraq and, last but not least, allegations of Mr Berlusconi's collusion with Cosa Nostra (Squires 2009; Allum 2011, p. 287). As postulated by Kaplan on Debordian premises:

no new culture could be invented by these blind, driven, deficient individuals – certainly not an organic traditional folk culture. Instead, a corrupt, kitsch commercial culture would flourish, supplying prefabricated emotions and ideas to mass publics. This culture distorts the populace's true humanity and reflects either the imposed tastes of the elites, or the vulgarity of the masses whose desires are not restrained by any self-discipline or character.

(Kaplan 2012, p. 469)

The issue at stake is therefore not just Berlusconi's leadership and charisma, rather – as suggested by Shin and Agnew (2008, p. 11) – the concept of «followership» that he has been able to inculcate. In other words, to understand Berlusconi's power, one should explore on what premises deception has been built.

*The yoga of deception, or how to fool people*

When diversity has been eliminated  
(the yogi's) action is to give rise to another creation.

ŚS 3: 7

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<sup>8</sup> Hate campaigns against Muslims, extracomunitarian migrants, «gypsies» and the infamous *respingimenti*, a rejection policy in agreement with the Libyan government of Muammar Gaddafi, Berlusconi's personal friend.

The phenomenon of separation is part and parcel of the unity of the world, of a global social praxis that has split up into reality on the one hand and image on the other.

SoS 7

One of the keys to understanding the myth of Silvio Berlusconi is to examine his capacity to present himself as a role model, and therefore to generate mimetic desire. Berlusconi built his political and entrepreneurial career on religious imagery. The construction of his power mirrors the conditions discussed in 1972 by Herbert Marcuse:

If [...] state and society are now viewed, indirectly or directly, as divine institutions whose authority beyond this is derived either from its mere existence or mere permanence, or from a mystical *âme nationale* [...], this signifies the elevation of the existing system of domination above any possibility of justification *vis-à-vis* the insight and need of individuals. The authoritative order embracing state and society is at once the «divine and natural» order of things.

(Marcuse 2008, p. 68)

To incarnate unrestrained power, Berlusconi has borrowed vastly from popular Christology and Marian devotion. His entrepreneurial and political career is a mission, i.e. the new Italian miracle. Allegedly the «Man of Providence», formerly a title of Benito Mussolini, Berlusconi was chosen by God: «I have been anointed by the Lord. There is something divine about being chosen by the people. It is a serious matter that somebody who has been chosen by the people, the anointed one, could even think to betray the citizens' mandate.» (*la Stampa*, 2009).<sup>9</sup> As Newell observes: «The famous *discesa in campo*, for example, overflows with religious allusions in Berlusconi's presentation of it.» (2011, p. 352; cf. Parotto 2007, p. 26) His followers are like «missionaries», or «apostles»: «I (Berlusconi) will explain you the Gospel of Forza Italia, the Gospel of Silvio» (in Wehling 2012, p. 108). His behaviour and deeds have been repeatedly presented as those of an infallible ruler.<sup>10</sup> In brief, he incarnates divine good – hence his wrathful bewilderment when his party lost the administrative elections in Naples and Milan (May 2011). On that occasion Berlusconi said: «You will repent [...] pray the Lord that nothing bad happens [...] now that the others have won» (Argento 2011).

Berlusconi – through a persistent self-victimisation – has also the traits of the martyr: «I am the Jesus Christ of politics. I am a patient victim, I put up with everyone, I sacrifice myself for everyone» (BBC News

<sup>9</sup> This is standard practice in politics. See, for instance, Lincoln's study of social, political and cosmic disorder in Achaemenian Persia and Bush's USA as a result of leaders falsely claiming divine intervention and then building governance on lies (Lincoln 2007).

<sup>10</sup> «Should journalists do the exegesis of what Mr Berlusconi says, they will see he is always right.» *L'Espresso*, November, 11<sup>th</sup> 1994.

2006). A self-declared believer of the Christian turn-the-other-cheek philosophy, he called himself a *miracolato* when he was assaulted by a protester with a story of mental illness on December 2009 (Wehling 2012, p. 108). The former PM, who was left bleeding and traumatised, managed to emerge as a merciful forgiver (except pretending maximum penal severity) and in the aftermath of the incident he started the promotion of a love-cum-forgive culture as well as the restyling of his party as the Party of Love (il Partito dell'Amore). Finally, in a culturally Catholic country, Berlusconi's so much advertised devotion for his mother, Mamma Rosa, contributed significantly to enhance his identification with the perfect son, Jesus.<sup>11</sup>

But is the mythology of the Son of God of Roman Catholicism actually fitting Silvio Berlusconi? Despite efforts in filling out the place of a displaced Holy (Žižek 1989, p. 220), other mythologies can be looked at for a more persuasive analysis of Berlusconi's delirium of omnipotence. In particular, the Hindu god Śiva, his stories and his revelation will herein serve the purpose to show how the exploitation of divine imagery can be dangerous and deceitful if performed by an egomaniac *sādhaka* (practitioner).

As the tales of Lord Śiva, the myth of Silvio Berlusconi entails contradictory elements. While ruling perpetually immersed in a state of self-reference (*vimarśa*)<sup>12</sup> with no external contradictors, he is also deeply embedded in the immanent world. He is the orgiastic satyr who seduces 21<sup>st</sup> century *apsarās* (celestial damsels) during his extramarital dalliances. He is surrounded by loyal *gaṇas* (attendants) and *gandharvas* (celestial musicians/singers) and enjoys the *pañcamākaras*<sup>13</sup> on occasion of banquets and private parties. He presents himself as the ideal husband loyal to his personal *pativratā*,<sup>14</sup> unless she turns in a vengeful Durgā claiming respect for herself and her offspring. He is the epitome of filial devotion, the one who owes everything to his mother (cf. *jñānādhiṣṭānaṁ mātṛkā*, ŚS 1, p. 4).<sup>15</sup> He is the

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11 For a comprehensive list of Berlusconi's religious quotes, see Travaglio and Gomez 2006, pp. 2015-2021.

12 He once declared: «I am Berlusconi-oriented» (in Poli 1988, p. 271).

13 The five Ms at the core of left-hand Tantric ritualism: *madya* (wine), *māṁsa* (meat), *matsya* (fish), *mudra* (parched grain, in this case, spaghetti) and *maithuna* (sexual intercourse).

14 «A woman devoted to the husband,» in traditional Hinduism.

15 'The ground of knowledge is *mātṛkā* [the mother]'.

ascetic *yogin* who takes the vow of chastity in order to achieve a supreme result (i.e. electoral success; Merlo 2006). He is Śaṅkara, the one who dispenses joy and happiness. He is the Lord of the Dance (*naṭarāja*) who creates by means of his impetuous and (to date) unrestrained performance a new world (and many financial empires). He is *mṛtyunjāya*, the one who defeats death, the embodiment of youth and (sexual) vigour, and the proof that money can buy not only love but life. He is Bhairava (the Terrible One) to his enemies and Tripurāntaka, the one who destroys Tripura, the abode of terrible communist *asuras* (demons). Despite using women as a commodity,<sup>16</sup> he admits to be in touch with his feminine side, thus embodying Śiva Ardhanārīśvara («half-male and half-female»). But it is in the phallic imagery of the self-promoted campaign of a playboy Prime Minister that Berlusconi mocks Śiva's iconography at best; he is the *liṅga*.

All these analogies must not lead to the wrong conclusions. I am not suggesting in any way that Berlusconi is or resembles Śiva – just like I doubt his praxis could recall Jesus Christ's. However, as long as politicians from different latitudes seem to enjoy divine parallels, I will continue this exercise in order to show the dangers behind such convenient exegeses.

In this case, one has to keep in mind that the myth of Śiva is an extremely fluid sacred narrative continuously processed and informed by the cultural «noise» produced by Hindus across the world. Conversely, Berlusconi's myth is a yoga constructed for its own self-maintenance.

Classic yoga, like the one theorised by Patañjali or the aphorisms revealed to Vasugupta, is union. Like politics, it is a path aiming to investigate suffering and to transcend it. Advocates of Berlusconi may claim that he is a misled *yogin* tricked by *māyā* (illusion) in his genuine effort to pursue *samādhi*, the cessative state in which *avidyā* (ignorance) is vanquished. A more radical defender could suggest that Berlusconi embodies the extreme *aghori*-like ascetic who needs to go through excess and anti-normative practices to achieve the greater good. My argument provides a rather different exegesis.

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16 Following sex scandals and several allegations about more or less legitimate relationships, Berlusconi was presented by his lawyer Niccolò Ghedini not as a prostitute client, but as «the final user» (*utilizzatore finale*).

Berlusconi's praxis sharply contrasts yogic precepts for those who aspire towards freedom (incidentally, one of the most recurrent terms in Berlusconi's political and entrepreneurial action). Yogic *yamas* (lit. «restraints») recommend a strict adherence to five ethical precepts, namely *ahiṃsā* (non-violence), *satya* (truthfulness), *asteya* (non-stealing), *brahmacārya* (chastity) and *aparigraha* (non-possessiveness or non-grasping). The true *yogin* is also required to observe many *nīyamas* (cultural habits), including *śauca* (purity), *santośa* (contentment), *tapas* (austerity, or stoic endurance of discomfort without complaint) and *svadhyaya* (the habit of study and reflection) (*Yogasūtra* 2: 32, cf. Dhand 2002, p. 355).

Yet Berlusconi's performance adheres to different principles, and in so doing it has rendered Italy an arena for a major crisis under political, economic and most of all cultural terms. Using the Lipman-Blumen's table of «fourteen destructive behaviours» (2005, pp. 19-20), Allums has shown that Berlusconi has adopted at least eleven of them, namely «1) feeding illusions of followers, creating dependency; 2) playing to “basest fears and needs”; 3) stifling constructive criticism; 4) misleading followers through lies; 5) subverting justice system and committing crimes; 6) building totalitarian/dynastic regime; 7) failing to nurture other leaders; 8) setting one group against another; 9) fostering hatred of other groups among followers; 10) identifying scapegoats; and 11) promoting incompetence, cronyism, corruption» (Allum 2011, p. 285).

Through the construction of a quasi-religious myth, Berlusconi exerts confusion and illusion.<sup>17</sup> Eventually he provides a theory of liberation that suits himself only and at the same time it is the source of *avidya* (ignorance) in its fourfold form; *asmita* (egoism), *raga* (attachment), *dveśa* (aversion) and *abhiniveśa* (love of physical life) (*Yogasūtra* 2: 3). So while in the case of classic yoga, *māyā* is a threat to the performer, here Illusion is the *sādhana saṅginī* (female companion) of the erotic ascetic.<sup>18</sup> In the myth of power constructed by Berlusconi, the practitioner believes to dominate the goddess Māyā and to be the Master of Illusion. In fact, he is just enacting the spectacle of hubris and ignorance. The yogic

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<sup>17</sup> This is what Debord, in rather polemical tone, has condemned as a practice aiming at cultural subjugation and control (McDonough 2006, p. 42).

<sup>18</sup> Berlusconi relentlessly presents himself as a man in control, both capable of abstinence and great passion. In that he confirms Hakim's analysis on erotic capital as a fourth asset, after the theorisation of economic, cultural and social capital (Hakim 2010).

copulation (*maithuna*) with Māyā has not allowed the *sādhakā* to achieve extinction (*sāmadhi*), but only parliamentary immunity, a state of immanent grace sustained by the mimetic desire generated by the proliferation of hagiographic narratives. Eventually in the *kathāmṛta* (story) of Berlusconi everything proves deceitful. The Italian former PM is not in control of his power (as the true *yogin* is) because his practice is built on the erosion of every ideology. Berlusconi's *sādhana* is *adharmā* (disorder) in practice.

*The yoga of illusion, or how to be fooled by Māyā*

(The *yogin*'s) feeling of pleasure and pain is external.

ŚS 3: 34.

The owners of [...] historical surplus value were the masters of the knowledge and enjoyment of directly experienced events.

SoS 128.

The essence of Berlusconi's programme is simply to conserve and reinforce his capital (political, economic, erotic, etc.). In order to do that, he has chosen to be the response to all the many contradictory desires of the Italians, including his many and diverse political allies (Ferrera and Gualmini 2004, p. 152). After almost thirty years of absolute dominion on the media industry,<sup>19</sup> Berlusconi has restrained «the noise in the channel of communication,» a concept that linguist Jurij Lotman identified as the fundamental motor of cultural change (1990, pp. 96-99). Reduced to nil (as in the case of censorship and denigration campaigns against dissidents), the production of culture – including its dynamics of resistance – is no more informative but only performative. When such conditions subsist, then «information devours its content» (Baudrillard 1994, p. 80).

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<sup>19</sup> Berlusconi owns the larger editorial group in Italy (Mondadori) and through Mediaset he possesses the three major private broadcasting channels (Rete4, Canale 5 and Italia 1). Further to that, as PM, he controlled the three state video and radio channels (RAI 1, 2 and 3). In 2004, the Freedom of the Press Global Survey downgraded Italy to «partly free» as a result of Berlusconi's influence on the control of information (Freedom House 2004).

The attainment of knowledge is therefore precluded to Berlusconi who manifestly does not accept «perceiving», «inferring» and «reception» of external verbal testimony (*Sāṃkhyakārikā* 4-5).<sup>20</sup> This is what Debord meant when he observed that: «By means of the spectacle the ruling order discourses endlessly upon itself in an interrupted monologue of self-praise.» [SoS 24] Debord's analysis is particularly convincing here, especially in its formulation of existence as a «colonised sector» (1961, p. 22) where the borders of licit and illicit are regulated by production, and its control. But what happens if, as Situationist International predicted, the only aim of the controller is the creation of a ghetto on premises such as capital, authority and charisma?<sup>21</sup> In order to give control back to the productive forces, the irrationalism perpetuated through consolidated myths of oppression must be disbanded. This – Debord suggests (*ibid.*, p. 24) – can be only achieved by providing new opportunities (or avant-gardism).

Yet during Berlusconi's time as PM, the production of new (dissenting) culture was radically threatened. The capacity to exert freedom of expression at selected time and venues – in other words, to be noisy – was minimised, and the creativity that is supposed to feature the aesthetic performance core to the production of culture was nullified. In her now classic 1988 essay, Gayatri Chakraborty-Spivak asked: «Can the subaltern speak?» Though still a legitimate question, more than twenty years later one may wonder who the subaltern is. Hegemony is not a concept that describes a particular form of power. Rather it is a way of analysing how power is produced and reproduced, and then negotiated. Or, in other terms, of how knowledge as capital is obtained and transmitted. The subaltern is therefore not the object of hegemony but the consumer of hegemony, while the producer of hegemony can be located across traditional social classes. The question should be thus rephrased as such: Is the subaltern listened? Is the subaltern given a chance to complain about the product? Is the subaltern allowed to choose between products?

While Berlusconi's deceitful self-reference is reinforced by religious analogies in a way that it recalls *Śiva-sūtra* 2: 26: «the Master is the means», Debord partially answers my questions when he observes that:

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20 For a translation of the *Sāṃkhyakārikā*, see Burley 2007, pp. 163-179.

21 Cf. Allum's analysis and critique of Berlusconi as statesman, salesman and superstar (2011, p. 282).

The life in question is after all produced solely as a form of pseudo-gratification which still embodies repression. A smug acceptance of what exists is likewise quite compatible with a purely spectacular rebelliousness, for the simple reason that dissatisfaction itself becomes a commodity as soon as the economics of affluence finds a way of applying its production methods to this particular raw material.

(SoS 59)

As in myth, where the deeds of a deity/hero are tailored to set an example (i.e. to generate mimetic desire), Berlusconi proposes himself as a role model. However his narrative ignores the possibility of dissent and its dynamics (Benjamin 2005, p. 260). Berlusconi is neither the Master nor the righteous *yogin*. Despite his self-promotion as an almighty wise ruler, he has not the skills to master Illusion (the goddess Māyā) and certainly he has not the necessary knowledge to understand that she is using him to implement in society the proliferations of what, in Lacanian theory, are known as *objets petit a* (unattainable objects of desire).

In Derridean terms, Berlusconi raped himself to give the illusion of «the other's decision in me» (1988, p. 634) with all its political consequences. This performance entails the spread of surplus enjoyment as a way to veil the Thing itself, in this case the maintenance of the myth for the benefit of its architect's existence. Eventually Berlusconi falls prey of his own hubris and is tricked by his own yoga. When he is given *prasād* (presentation, including rather esoteric forms of ritual offerings) in exchange of *darśana* (vision) and *siddhi* (power) – the two elements that allow the existence of the spectacle and its perpetuation (SoS 60) – the only thing he can actually give back is the *illusion* of power (cf. Kaplan 2012, p. 458). In that Berlusconi dangerously plays with symbolic capital.

In his commentary to ŚŚ 1: 21, Bhāskara informs us that the freedom of the *yogin* to act in this world derives from his identification with consciousness (*jñāna*) and manifests as the possibility of affecting the universe by acting on its essential components (*bhūta*) (Dyczkowski 1992, pp. 40-41). While we observe here a further similarity between the social consciousness in Debord (SoS 88)<sup>22</sup> and the «I» consciousness revealed in the *Śiva-sūtras*, the construction of the counter-offering – which mirrors the Derridean notion of «consciousness

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<sup>22</sup> This is expressed as «critical consciousness of the return of social revolution» (Perniola 1999, p. 98) – in Marxist terms, an abrogative movement challenging and eventually abolishing the status quo at the origin of uneven development.

of nothing», the basis upon which everything is constructed (Derrida 2007, p. 8) – must not be mistaken for power (*śakti*). In order to be so, it should prevent suffering (*Yoga-sūtra* 2: 16), ignorance and its fruits (*Yoga-sūtra* 2: 34).

Berlusconi's yoga does not aim to achieve the state of grace defined as *dharma-megha-samādhi* (YS 4: 29).<sup>23</sup> It is an exercise for the satisfaction of the performer's ego only.<sup>24</sup> Berlusconi subverts the three original categories of human existence summarised by Sartre as «to do», «to have», «to be» (2005, p. 597) and epitomises the parable of post-capitalist human society from «being» to «having» into «appearing» (SoS 17). In that he seems to adhere to Kashmiri Śaivism that «it is also an idealism in so far as it teaches that things exist as objects in the external world because they are perceived to exist» (Dyczkowski 1992, p. 3; cf. Sartre 2005, p. 3). In fact, Berlusconi fails to go beyond his petty ego. Therefore he will not understand the supreme message of the Consciousness of the «I»: *Śivo'ham* («I am Śiva»). Eventually he appears for what he truly is. The treacherous *yogin* is a cheater entangled in self-mimetic desire. In Kantian terms, he cannot provide any sanctuary to the dread he generates by means of a yoga built on the construction of the Enemy (Virno 2004, p. 31). Berlusconi's last personal refuge is therefore to expose his own excesses.

**The Italian former PM – to borrow from film culture – ends up *Being John Malkovich*. As in the 1999 Academy Award nominated movie written by Charlie Kaufman and directed by Spike Jonze, Berlusconi is so frustrated by his failure to please everybody and by his attempts to be in character that his supposedly creative mimetic activity turns into a vicious circle. This is evocative of Sartre's «yogic» analysis of the post-modern world where social problems arise when «I try to unite my consciousness not with *my* body but with the body of *others*» (2005, p. 327). Berlusconi wants to be Berlusconi in a Berlusconi world. When he organises private parties and sings surrounded by prostitutes and models: «Thank goodness for Silvio!»<sup>25</sup> and then says: «The majority of Italians want to be like me, they see themselves**

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23 The state of utmost meditation defined as «cloud-of-righteousness.»

24 This confirms Berlusconi's interpretation of capital and capitalism as a cult where «the all-pervasive language of the market puts all interpersonal relations under the constraint of an egocentric orientation toward one's own preference.» (Habermas 2005, p. 333)

in me and agree with my behaviour» (Associated Press 2009), he seems to rephrase the old Śaivite mantra: *śivam bhūtvam śivam yajet* («To worship Śiva one must become Śiva»). The problem is that Berlusconi worships himself and, as Spike Jonze's movie shows, the consequences of self-mimetic desire are disastrous. Like John Malkovich, Berlusconi is frozen in a paranoid reality where nobody understands him, even if they have to.<sup>26</sup> Eventually he can well see himself and the Other, but he will never see the seeing (Sartre 2005, p. 328). As in Kashmiri Śaivism, the act of seeing (*vimarśa*) and its cognising activity are core to supreme consciousness (*cit*), a feature that the former PM has shown to lack.

The *Śiva-sūtras* say: «The Self is the actor. The stage is the inner Self. The spectators are the senses. The pure state is achieved by the power of the (illuminated) intellect» (ŚS 3: 9-12). Śiva teaches that the true *yogin* must be able to perceive the different activities of each spectator. «The actor [...] never forgets his true identity, he deceives others but he is never himself deceived. The perfected *yogi*, at one with Śiva, constantly reflects upon his own nature.» (Dyczkowski, pp. 114-115) This brings us back to the concept that Berlusconi's yoga is mere performance reflecting the need to please everybody. As such it is not conducive to any form of liberation from present and future suffering. Whether presented in Christological (*kenosis*) or Yogic (*nirvāṇa*, *samādhi*, *sūnyatā*) terms, the Berlusconi deliverance does not convince. This argument parallels Debord when he says that: «There can be no freedom apart from activity, and within the spectacle all activity is banned – a corollary of the fact that all *real* activity has been forcibly channelled into the global construction of the spectacle.» (SoS: 27).

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25 The video is available with English subtitles on: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uTVr0zkDfys>

26 Cf. the national and international reactions to the announcement of Berlusconi's candidacy to the 2013 general election soon followed by at least four alternative plans (*La Repubblica* 12/12/2012)

Berlusconi is so entangled in self-mimetic performance that he is no longer able to discern reality from Berlusconism.<sup>27</sup> While I am not suggesting he is an innocent victim of Illusion, I want to stress his active role in fostering a perverse plan, which eventually proved to be uncontrollable. The oxymoron generated by Berlusconi's yoga is exemplified in the ninth thesis of Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle*: «In a world that really has been turned on its head, truth is a moment of falsehood.» (SoS 9) These words truly epitomise the activity of Māyā in the immanent world and contribute significantly to clarify the weakness of the fake *yogin* when entrusted with a position of power. Even further, they draw our attention on the disturbing relation between power and freedom, as exemplified in the 1952 statement of Letterist International (a Paris-based collective of radical artists and theorists founded by Debord): «We believe that the most urgent expression of freedom is the destruction of idols, especially when they present themselves in the name of freedom.» (quoted in Marcus 2002, p. 6) In revealing the disorder generated by egoism and ignorance, the teachings of Situationist International and those revealed by Śiva both promote the arousal of consciousness and a distribution of knowledge in a global way. Although a text overtly critic of theology and religious fetishism (SoS 20, 25, 59, 67, 132), *The Society of the Spectacle* advances a social critique that is not at odds with Yoga.

*The yoga of revolution, or how to contrast the treacherous politician*

Then (when the *yogi*) is established in pure awareness  
(his craving) is destroyed and so the individual soul cease to exist.

(ŚS 3: 32)

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27 For instance, the former PM suggested that the words of Cardinal Bertone apropos of his involvement with prostitutes (one of these a minor) were too vague to be directed at him and might well be general remark. Following such comment, Cardinal Bagnasco – the current President of the Italian Episcopal Conference – has publicly remarked that «Whoever accepts a public position must understand the sobriety, personal discipline, sense of measure and honour that come with it.» (BBC News 2011)

In contrast to the passing *fashions* that clash and fuse on the frivolous surface of a contemplated pseudo-cyclical time, the *grand style* of our era can ever be recognized in whatever is governed by the obvious yet carefully concealed necessity for revolution.

(SoS 162)

The construction of hierarchies of power plays a relevant role in all societies. In order to survive to the perpetual challenge for power, new recruits are always needed. The creation and functioning of social roles is thus subordinate to the degree of information performed, exerted and exchanged by actors from different social sectors. I have already explained how Berlusconi has caused a general loss of information (i.e. knowledge) in contemporary Italy while his propaganda is entirely focussed on aesthetic and self-celebratory representation. In brief, Italy is now in the Debordian «showing» phase, a stage where, to paraphrase the *Śiva-sūtras*, we are all spectators of the senses of the *yogin* and where activity (including any revolutionary effort) is limited to the pursue of consent. However, in this case, we are forced to participate to the feelings of the *yogin*, whether we like it or not. Our appreciation is required up to a point. And surely our critique, our right to be «noisy» and to inform social capital, is an annoying construction.

In Berlusconi self-promoting exercise (whether political or entrepreneurial) there is no effort to examine external claims in terms of appearance (*pratibhāsa*), convention (*vyavahāra*) and ultimate reality (*paramārtha*) (Timalsina 2009, p. 10). By reducing his opponents' arguments to insignificance, he is free to conclude: «I trust the intelligence of the Italian people too much to think that there are so many pricks (*coglioni*) around who would vote against their own best interests.» (*Corriere della Sera* 2006). While I doubt this reasoning may be reminiscent in any way of the well-known discourse on *adhyāsa* (misconception or erroneous attribution) attributed to Śaṅkara,<sup>28</sup> I am more inclined to believe to the *Śiva-sūtras* when they teach that: «(Empirical) knowledge is bondage.» (ŚS 3: 2) Berlusconi is neither free of passion (*rajas*) nor of ignorance (*tamas*), the typical features of the «disappointed lover» in Situationism (Ohr 1999, p. 17). So, as Bhāskara suggests in his commentary to the above *sūtra*, the mind of the incompetent *sādhaka* «is distracted by its

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28 Cf. the rope-snake (*raja-sarpa*) example on erroneous perception. When there is superimposition of one thing on another, the latter is not affected by the the former.

interaction with objects of the senses because of its attachment, etc. (to them)» (in Dyczkowski 1992, p. 96).<sup>29</sup>

This brings us back to my initial question: Why did Berlusconi's consensus drop when sex scandals became public? The answer can be found in the quasi-divine, soteriological nature of the myth of Berlusconi and the continuous exploitation of bourgeois stereotyped concepts such as God, Country and Family. Within such simplistic coordinates, when things go wrong the acceptance of betrayal is hard to swallow. Furthermore, as Debord noted, this is often followed by cultural impoverishment: «All community and all critical sense are dissolved during this movement in which the forces that could grow by separating are not yet reunited.» (SoS 25).

Pintchman has discussed the same mechanism in her study of failed *vratas* (vows) among Hindu women in Varanasi (India). In particular, it is the exegesis of failure that fits the political and entrepreneurial *sādhana* of Berlusconi: «[...] when *vratas* don't deliver what they promise, there are some foreseeable ways that a faithful votary might choose to explain the course of events to themselves or to others.» (Pintchman 2006, p. 220) This is exactly what happened in Italy, with Berlusconi's entourage and constituents, the disciples of the fake *yogin*, acting like the finest exegetes in their effort to interpret and to mask the contradictory and failing policies of their Master. In this landscape, Berlusconi's practice will work as long as an(y) explanation is provided. Yet his *sādhana* is far from being a «systematic visualization that prepares [...] for the “nondeliberate” and “nonwillful” vision of the nature of reality» (Sarbacker 2005, p. 114). Berlusconi's praxis implies the use of semiotic void by-products to divert the attention of informative (critical) knowledge. Therefore, as soon as a contrary performance providing the sufficient informative noise to counterbalance the illusory and merely aesthetic yoga of Berlusconi is provided,<sup>30</sup> the delusion of the devotees – as Pintchman (2006, p. 231) further reads – will turn into a feeling of punishment. Similar

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29 Dhand elaborates this and observes that: «[...] we are all Persons, but being engrossed in a distracting world, we are not cognizant of our true identity. Hence we bumble along, in the mistaken belief that we really are teachers and lawyers, men and women, deriving a fool's comfort from our common consensus of ignorance.» (2002, p. 353)

30 For instance alternative economic plans as those promoted by the current PM, Mario Monti, and endorsed by the EU and the international community.

dynamics of failure and delusion in a controlled society have been discussed by Debord in his *Critique of Urbanism*. These are discussed as:

one of those fragments of social power that claim to represent a coherent whole, and which tend to impose themselves as a total explanation and organization, while doing nothing except masking the real social totality that has produced them and which they preserve.

(Debord, in McDonough 2002, p. 103).

When the praxis of the treacherous politician is publicly recognised in its failure to answer individual and collective hopes, needs and expectations, the only foreseeable outcome is that the clash between the *sādhakā*'s topsy-turvy reality and the phenomenal world is eventually revealed. *Māyā* withdraws because, as Bhāskara explains apropos of *Śiva-sūtra* 3: 2 «[...] the root of all the impediments that prevent one from creating what one desires is attachment to the object of senses» (in Dyczkowski 1992, p. 96). In acknowledging that we are not the *yogin*'s senses, we eventually experience the true nature of reality by our own power (cf. Bhāskara on 3: 11 in Dyczkowski 1992, p. 116) and go through the dramatic experience theorised by Debord as «social hallucination»: «In a society where no one is any longer recognizable by anyone else, each individual is necessarily unable to recognize his own reality. Here ideology is at home; here separation has built its world.» (SoS 217)

#### *Conclusion: Debordian grapes of wrath in Māyā's vineyard of deception*

The use power for egotistic purposes and its perpetuation through the construction of quasi-religious mythology turns out to be a mechanism that self-sustains itself whilst contrasting forces are emarginated (cf. Virno 2004, p. 40). The ancient *Śiva-sūtras* and Situationist International suggest that if the generator of power is unable to keep control, s/he is eventually forced out too. Yet, quite worryingly, this results in a paradoxical social situation where to a dominant ideology does not correspond a dominated one (Balibar 1998, p. 167-170). If social unity, or yoga, is not accomplished, the clash between the performative-cum-informative cultural noise and the narcissistic notion of governance takes place at the margins.

Unity – far from being an idealistic construction of consensus barely achievable even in totalitarian systems – has to be pursued by means of a programme aiming to alienate what Debord, in rather Śaivite fashion, calls «[...] the illusion of some variant of state and bureaucratic socialism [...] consciously manipulated by local ruling classes as simply the ideology of economic development.» (SoS 113) Only when such a target is accomplished, it is possible to negotiate (once again) notions like the nature of equality, its power and the role of faith and ethics in the construction of society.

The concept of equality, however, is a relative one. Ulrike Meinhof informs us that: «[...] the demand for equal rights no longer puts into question the social conditions of inequality that exist between people. On the contrary, it merely wants inequality to be applied systematically. It demands equality within inequality [...].» (2008, p. 191; cf. Marcuse 2008, p. 70) In response to that, the power of equality promoted in the *Śiva-sūtras* and the universalist stances of Debord's internationalism permit a thorough investigation of the negotiation processes of social dogmas, but need to be addressed in cultural terms. In other words, the Italian crisis must be resolved considering the Italian cultural background. The risk is otherwise that of being trapped once again in the paroxysmal fragmentation of the signifying consciousness (§S 1: 10) or the globalisation and deterritorialisation of the revolutionary programme (SoS 42).

In the years of Berlusconiism, a form of consensus grounded on the performance of nothing has been inculcated in Italian culture. Dissenting informative counterculture has been delegitimised, boycotted, ridiculed and confined to the margins (Marcuse 2008, p. 84). Umberto Eco in his examination on the construction of the enemy (2008) has proved this to be nothing but the politics of totalitarianism.<sup>31</sup> In that he seems to agree with Foucault when he says that: «The struggle against the established powers [...] continues at the very heart of confinement, in the saturnalia of reason.» (2007, p. 214) It is precisely in this context that the focus must be switched from issues of power ownership to the capacity to control power (Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 344). The confinement of knowledge to the realm of madness –

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<sup>31</sup> Skoll informs us that: «It is frequently forgotten that the word “totalitarian” originated in Italy. First applied to Mussolini's rule in May 1923 by critics, the title totalitarian was taken up by the regime after 1925 and applied to itself. On 28 October that year, for the third anniversary of the March on Rome, Mussolini coined the formula that Fascism meant a system in which ‘all is for the state, nothing is outside the state, nothing and no one are against the state’» (2010, p. 55). In contemporary Italy, Berlusconi identified himself with the state (cf. Orlando 2002).

Foucault's paradox of the «saturnalia of reason» – promoted and vindicated by Berlusconi proves once again the former PM's incapacity to discern. Berlusconi is a fake *yogin* who is unable to control the power (*siddhi*) he acquired by means of a perverse yoga.

Unrestrained *śakti* (power) is a sensible issue in Yoga, and the *Śiva-sūtras* give guidance on how to control the ignorance (*avidhya*) and injustice (*adharmā*) resulting from it. Bhāskara, in commenting ŚS 3: 25, informs us that the effort of the *yogin* must be directed towards the production of energy as a result of his penetrating activity «in the plane of universal agency [...] and so realises everywhere the supreme sovereign freedom (of consciousness) which is (the universal) cognizing and acting subjectivity that, full and perfect (*paripūrṇa*), (perceives and does all things).» (In Dyczkowsky 1992, p. 138) In political terms, revolution and its outcomes have to be controlled and channelled in the right (*dharmic*) path to counter the «naturalist and personalist justification of authority» (Marcuse 2008, p. 69) and the «ideology of profit» (Meinhof 2008, p. 197). The practice for the awakening of *śakti* (power) and its rise until the utmost *cakra* as discussed in Kṣemarāja's commentary to *Śiva-sūtra* 2: 3 prompts a concluding reflection. Pure consciousness is a state that passes through the consciousness of articulate speech (*vaikharī*) as supreme power, the body itself of knowledge. Berlusconi's incapacity to control his power is ultimately manifest because of his relentless failure to control his speech.<sup>32</sup> It is in denying reality and the means of knowledge that the fake *yogin* reveals his weak nature and the impossibility to truly assert: *Śivo 'ham*.

I expect a comparative examination of different texts such the one I have conducted here is liable of criticism. In particular, one may judge the whole exercise a biased attempt to conveniently handle different cultural products to discredit an established order. There is, however, a more scholarly justification to my exercise. The building of a methatheory derived

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<sup>32</sup> Among the many embarrassing outbursts, I quote from Allum (2011, pp. 288-289): «Berlusconi is not scared of offending. This manifests itself in numerous tactless and improper gaffes at home and abroad which highlight his undignified demeanour, especially when being offensive. For example, he once stated 'better a passion for beautiful girls than being gay' and argued that 'Mussolini never killed anyone. Mussolini used to send people on vacation in internal exile'. In July 2003, he told the German MEP, Martin Schulz: 'I know that in Italy there is a man producing a film on Nazi concentration camps — I shall put you forward for the role of Kapo (guard chosen from among the prisoners) — you would be perfect'. In 2008, he described Barack Obama as 'young, handsome and also tanned, so he has all the qualities to agree with you', which he apparently believed was a compliment.»

from two arguably different philosophical systems proceeds from the deep notion of self-reflexivity that is innate in such systems and contributes to the legitimisation of a theory of praxis (Žižek 2001, p. 27). As discussed by Derrida:

One must also consider, to be sure, the singular involvement in the mobility of a highly differentiated, tactical, and strategic context. [...] There are discursive layers whose stratification allows long sequences to remain subjacent to ephemeral formations. Even if a certain structural heterogeneity remains [...] it does not divide different types of discourse, but rather is at work within each one of them.

(Derrida 2006, p. 149)

Mere verbal opposition cannot be taken for an answer any longer. Words, and the power conveyed by their articulated constructions, must go beyond negative assertion («no») and prompt to action.<sup>33</sup> Also, if circumstances require it, they must promote and contribute to organised (in Hindu terms, yogic) struggle.

Being democratically elected, the *dharma* of Berlusconi is not forcibly the best form of governance. As the epic hero Bhīṣma teaches in the great Hindu epic – the *Mahābhārata* (12: 129-167) – desperate times require drastic measures. It is so that when *dharma* (order, law) is no more sufficient, *āpaddharma* (a practice only allowable in time of distress) is implemented. Revolution, a necessary occurrence often linked to the break of ordinary parameters of conduct, is therefore not forcibly bound to the accumulation of wrong *karma*, in Hindu terms, and certainly not confineable to the real of *adharma* (disorder). As the Italian situation has abundantly showed, the presence of Berlusconi is a contingency and although the Italian former PM does actually believe he has power of creation (*svarūpa śakti*), he is just a customer to Māyā, with little decisional power. In that he proves the idiotic fallacy of the common man in front of power so poignantly described by Sallust:

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<sup>33</sup> Cf. Debord and Baudrillard on political thought as a response to the «negative as a lived experience» (Hussey 2010, p. 69). On action vs. meditation in Debord, see Kaufmann 2006, p. 36.

Without reason do mankind complain of their nature, on the ground that it is weak and of short duration and ruled rather by chance than by virtue. For reflection would show on the contrary that nothing is greater or more excellent, and that nature has more often found diligence lacking in men than strength or endurance in itself.

*(Bellum Jugurthinum 1: 1-2)*

Finally, this article wants to contribute to a long tradition of critical analyses of phenomena of oppression and cultural exploitation. The convergence of religious studies – and particularly the use of alternative philosophical systems (e.g. Yoga and Hindu epistemology) – with social sciences has demonstrated that other ways to examine the religious justification of totalitarianism is possible. A theory of disobedience and the proliferation of programmatic revolutionary manifestos can, and should, stem from academic discourses, thus contrasting the pushes of totalitarian systems and the efforts of a liberal-democratic policy working to maintain such power (Žižek 2001, p. 3; Virno 2004, p. 51). Unlike Baudrillard who sees in the withdrawal of the spectacle a danger in its favouring ecstatic obscenity (1994, p. 22),<sup>34</sup> I call for obscenity (the violent rupture of the liberal-democratic status quo) as a way to achieve the ecstasy of enlightenment of true yoga and social liberation.

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<sup>34</sup> On the hostility of Situationist International towards Baudrillard, see McDonough 1997, p. 4.

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