

Book Review: The Liberty of Servants: Berlusconi's Italy by Maurizio Viroli.

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Silvio Berlusconi turned Italy's government into a medieval court and its people into servants, argues Maurizio Viroli. His latest book details the anti-democratic effects of the now-ex-Prime Minister's regime, and makes a passionate call for a civic rebirth in his homeland. [Kate Saffin](#) feels that Viroli's ideas about what went so wrong in Italy need to be heeded if the country is to succeed in its present struggle and fulfil its potential.

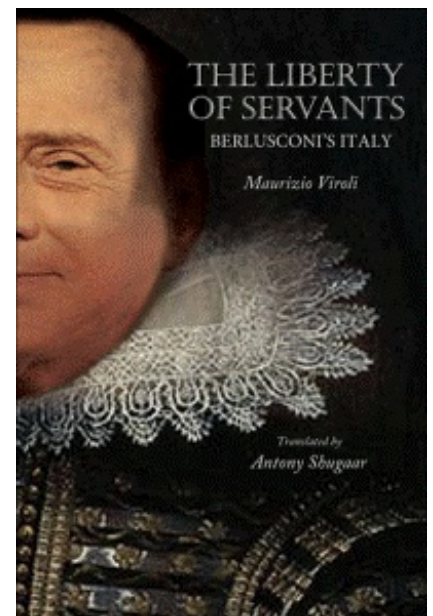


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The Liberty of Servants: Berlusconi's Italy. Maurizio Viroli. Princeton University Press. 200 pages. September 2011.

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Maurizio Viroli's *The Liberty of Servants* is a statement about the condition of the Italian population. Long an outspoken critic of the Berlusconi regime, Viroli has written on the legacy of Berlusconi's tight grip for [The New York Times](#) and various other news outlets, and has also published a noted [biography of Machivalli](#). Viroli holds posts as Professor of Politics at [Princeton University](#) and Professor of Political Communication at the University of Italian Switzerland in Lugano, and this well received work should cement him firmly as one of the strongest commentators of Italian politics.



Viroli first reminds us of the classical republican definition of the liberty of a citizen, in which an individual is free from being subjected to the arbitrary or 'enormous' power of one or several men. The power wielded by Silvio Berlusconi in the last two decades has been so vast and far reaching that Viroli feels Italian individuals were not truly citizens under the regime, but rather servants, for their liberty consisted only of not being hindered in the pursuit of their own ends.



Viroli likens Berlusconi's power structure and government to the court system long ago thrown out by most of the modern world, complete with courtiers, adulation, deep corruption, obsession with appearances, competition for attention from the central figure, and servile habits. The system that existed under Berlusconi certainly has no parallels in liberal and democratic countries, and ultimately Viroli finds Berlusconi to be close to a classic demagogue or oligarch. He also highlights interesting comparisons between the veiled tyranny of the Medici regime in Florence in the 16th Century and the Berlusconi 'court'.



Viroli mentions (although he could have said more) the role that women have played around Berlusconi, mainly as courtesans regularly paraded in the media, along with the private activities of the leader. The effect of the Berlusconi regime on the [perception of women in Italy](#) and on women's rights and equality will take many more years of analysis.

It has been easy for citizens and even leaders of other countries to pass Berlusconi off as a buffoon that can be laughed at and then ignored until he goes (or rather, went) away. We would do well to remind ourselves that this man did not go away for many years, all the while forging links with organised crime and dictators around the world, and that he held the keys to one of the largest economies in Europe which the stability of which the Euro and therefore all of us now depends.

Viroli makes some bold and controversial statements in his analysis of why Italy, of all places, succumbed to someone like Berlusconi. His answer is what he describes as the moral weakness of Italians, who don't care to defend their liberty too energetically and never have, and their "lack of self-esteem that in some cases masks itself with arrogance, and which makes men willing to become dependent on other men". He also cites a "betrayal of the elite" and passionately states that, "those whose duty it was to defend the integrity of the Italian republic failed to do so." He states that citizens are rewarded with liberty for having acted in accordance with virtue, but that Italians, at least the elite, have not acted with virtue and so are only enjoying the liberty of servants.

Viroli's timely book was written when Berlusconi's power was threatened and it looked as though his rule may come to an end. He describes his own recommendations and analysis at one point as out of step with the times. Events spectacularly overtook this book at the end of last year when Berlusconi [stepped down](#) as Prime Minister, but Viroli's thoughts and ideas about what went so wrong in Italy need to be understood and heeded if the country is to succeed in its present struggle and fulfil its potential.

Other countries should not think themselves above a similar narrative. As Viroli points out, "no democratic polity is immune to the combined power of media and money". It may not be so hard to imagine a Berlusconi figure rising to power in another Western country especially in light of the UK's own media scandals. Viroli asks us to learn from Italy's mistakes and "prepare ahead of time the appropriate defences against the rise of enormous power".

The book gives some suggestions for the future, such as reforms to minimise conflicts of interests by not allowing members of government to own or control media outlets. Strengthening liberty in Italy will occur when individuals are not allowed to become bigger than the law, as some are now. One of the most shocking points in Berlusconi's rule was the passing of the [Alfano Law](#), which protected the prime minister of Italy and the highest officers of the state from criminal proceedings. Education is also close to the author's heart and he calls for a re-education in actual and moral terms, not only for the elite but all Italians.

Viroli is angry and heartfelt throughout the book, longing for greater things for his homeland and a civic rebirth. Italians are proud and may not like being called morally weak, but now that a technocratic government is installed in Italy, Viroli, a true patriot, is ideally placed to be involved in helping to reconstruct their new government and society.

Dr Kate Saffin has worked as a medical doctor in London, Sydney and Paris and is a qualified General Practitioner. Most recently she completed the Masters in Public Health at King's College London and has subsequently worked for a think tank and as a freelance researcher in public and health policy. Her research interests lie in international development and the intersections between health, the environment, economics and politics. [Read more reviews by Kate.](#)

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