

Not Only Polverini's Pigs

Judith Harris (September 22, 2012)



Scandal at the Lazio regional government. A party, which was attended by around 2,000 people and cost 30,000 euros, was held in Rome. The event under the theme, "Ulysses returns and confronts his enemies" was organized a member of the regional government. In more than one photo Renata Polverini, head of the regional government, appears surrounded by grinning guys, girls in skimpy garb and geezers from her governing body, turned out in togas

ROME - Walk down a street - any street - in the region around Rome called Lazio, and ask a passerby what he thinks of this week's newest Italian corruption scandal, already dubbed "Laziogate." The answer: an eruption of outrage that makes the fireworks of the Fourth of July or Ferragosto pale by contrast. It is already formally admitted that elected regional political representatives have been helping themselves to millions of dollars of public funding, supposedly destined for "relations with voters," and squandering it on lavish dinners of oysters and champagne and other personal perks.



Symbolizing the whole affair are photos, splashed in all the newspapers, right and left, of an ancient Roman-style toga party held a couple of years ago that supposedly evoked the Fellini film "Satyricon."

In at least one photograph the governor of the Lazio Region, Renata Polverini, appears surrounded by grinning guys, girls in skimpy garb and geezers from her governing body, turned out in togas. Female members wore. In this descent into bad taste what took the cake were the big pig masks some party-goers wore.

This was not Mardi Gras: it was hedonistic politics alla Romana, and no one is denying the charges. They are instead passing the parcel along to others they say are guilty. A key regional counselor, tubby Franco Fiorito, who is known to his buddies as "Er Batman," in a mix of English and Romanaccio dialect, was hauled in by police for questioning. Instead of taking the Italian equivalent of the Fifth, "Batman" told investigators that he's been disgusted at the goings-on, and had personally written a letter of warning to Polverini, who, he claims, did not bother to reply. "Batman" Fiorito then furnished investigators the names of those he considers guilty of theft from the public trough. A furious Polverini's reaction to the mountain of evidence of colossal sums of stolen and wasted public funds was to stand up in front of TV cameras inside the Regional assembly building, and courageously threaten to resign.

This former trade union leader's governing coalition for Lazio has the backing of Berlusconi's PdL, and by Friday her show of repentance had dissipated, reportedly under pressure from fellow conservatives including Angelino Alfano of Silvio Berlusconi's Popolo della Liberta' party (PdL), and following a phone call from Silvio himself, fearful of his party's being branded the wrong way. On national TV Polverini explained, with pathos, that she'd been upset enough that for the first time in her life she "took some drops to get to sleep." She'd known nothing of all the waste: "I did not know how much Fiorito spent because it was not my official business to know it." As for her spending some \$100,000 a year on photographs, "And what am I supposed to do - cancel the history of the Lazio Region?"

Nevertheless, the next day, Sept. 21, she bullied the Regional governing assembly members into making cuts in their perks (fewer free limos with drivers, no more funding for the tiniest political groups, whittling down from 19 to eight the number of well-paid members of the Regional administrative council). In the end, she withdrew her threat of resignation. And whyever should she quit? she added aggressively, "Bersani should explain to me why I should resign when no one made Lusi and Penati quit."

She has a point: although Polverini is personally under an inquiry begun in 2011 by the Court of Accounts for misuse of public funds, she has plenty of company. When Pier Luigi Bersani, head of the left-leaning Partito Democratico (PD), was president of the Province of Milan, Filippo Penati headed his political office, a Rahm Emanuel to President Obama. Penati is under investigation for corruption by magistrates from Milan. Senator Luigi Lusi, former treasurer of a fledgling political party associated with Rome's former mayor Francesco Rutelli, was investigated by the Court of Accounts and formally accused of misappropriating public party funding in excess of \$60 million which allegedly paid for biweekly \$2,500 dinners, stays in luxury hotels like the Ritz Carlton in London and a vacation in the Bahamas.

Polverini failed to mention two other official investigations into the goings-on in Palermo and Naples. In short, the North of Italy, the South of Italy and the center - Lazio - are all hotbeds of corruption to an extent which few here imagined, and involved off-shore bank accounts and private real estate investments, as well as toga parties.

What makes all this particularly painful is that the evidence of the deep roots of corruption in politics smear the right, the center and the left. Few parties seem untouched - the Radical party is a noteworthy exception, but has a mere handful of votes. The scandals range moreover all over the



country, with investigations underway in North, Center and South. It is plain that the economic crisis, which becomes more severe with each passing month, has prompted investigators to look harder for waste. But where were they a decade ago? And what will happen now? "This is worse than the scandals that ended the First Republic in 1992," one old Italian hand sentenced. "But where do we go from here? Who is to take charge?" Who indeed? Until the present election law is revised (and it has not been), the answer can only be one of legitimate concern.

Sentenced Massimo Franco, editorialist for *Corriere della Sera*, "The year 2012 risks becoming the tomb of a way of governing, just as the judicial inquiries were two decades ago. The power vacuum that's on the horizon makes heads spin."

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