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Bové Rud A (2024) Persona and Politics. The Democratic Staging of Personality-Driven Leadership in Italy. PhD dissertation. Aarhus: Aarhus University

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> Man is least himself when he talks in his own person.
> Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth.
> (Wilde, 1891)

Wilde's paradox has quietly become a working principle of contemporary politics: the leader speaks most truthfully from behind a mask. As the party recedes, public life is increasingly conducted through a *persona* (and for a public), and it is by means of that mask, not in spite of it, that political conviction is now made legible. If political parties have shed their organisational density and their mediating function, individual leaders have moved to the centre of political competition, supplying the identification, the cognitive shortcuts and the affect that programmes and party labels once provided. This longer transformation, from the democracy of parties to the democracy of the public and now to a "bubble democracy" in which a once shared public fragments into self-referential bubbles, has recently been reconstructed by Damiano Palano (2020).

It is against this backdrop that Alberte Bové Rud's doctoral dissertation, defended in the history of ideas at Aarhus University, proposes a concept, "personality-driven politics", and tests it against the Italian case through Silvio Berlusconi, Matteo Salvini and Giorgia Meloni. The research question is deliberately two-directional: does the staging of personality-driven politics in Italy undermine or revitalise democracy? The early merit of the book lies in its refusal of the declinist reflex, and in the seriousness with which it pursues the harder and more interesting hypothesis, namely that the personalisation of political attention might be a revitalising, even a re-enchanting, force.

The most interesting move is conceptual. Bové Rud distinguishes between the "focus of attention" and the "focus of power". Personality-driven politics, the author argues, is not primarily about

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the concentration of power in the hands of an individual, the terrain of personalised or presidentialized politics, but about the centrality of the leader's "identity" as the very source of legitimacy: not what the politician offers, but who he or she is, or claims to be. From this follow three theses: a) that political narratives are built on biography, body, family and emotion; b) that they are communicated through the logic of entertainment *(politainment)*; and c) that the leader is staged as singular and authentic. The category is positioned at the intersection of three established literatures: Weberian charismatic authority, the personalisation of politics (Rahat and Kenig, 2018) and politainment. None of the three exhausts it, and the distinction between attention and power is elegant and does real analytical work.

Methodologically, it rests on a two-legged foundation: a contextualism extended well beyond the written text, and a deliberate selection of non-textual sources such as gestures, social-media posts, events and bodies. The opening historical chapter reconstructs three epochs of twentieth-century Italian leadership, namely the sublime (fascist) leader, the anonymous (post-war) leader and the unreliable (post-1968) leader, before the rupture of 1994 from which personality-driven politics emerges. The three protagonists are then read through mythological personae, with Berlusconi cast as the "knight", Salvini as the "jester" and Meloni as the "witch", and positioned along three representational dualities: reason and instinct, distinction and identification, distance and intimacy. The result is an imaginative and well justified expansion of what may count as a political source.

Several strengths deserve emphasis, and they are considerable. The book rejects the tired framing of Italy as "backward" or "anomalous", treating it instead as a laboratory and a magnifying glass for tendencies visible across consolidated democracies, a welcoming premise for anyone working on the Italian case. Its normative posture is genuinely even-handed: the chapter on the threats of personality-driven politics, namely oversimplification and authoritarianism, is balanced by one on its democratic hopes, and the author productively problematises the inflationary use of the word "crisis". The methodological wager, that a Facebook photograph or a hand gesture can be read as a meaningful political act, is bold and, within the history-of-ideas tradition, persuasively argued. The mythological

personae, finally, are evocative and could travel as a heuristic well beyond the three cases.

If one approaches the book from comparative politics, a few questions remain open rather than answered. The first concerns the cost of setting aside the personalisation and populist-radical-right literatures. The author does *epokhē* on populism as too broad and too loaded, leaning on the minimal definition of Mudde (2004) chiefly in order to move beyond it. The choice is coherent with the history-of-ideas framing, yet it invites the question whether personality-driven politics re-describes phenomena already theorised, among them personalisation, charismatic leadership, the "digital prince" (Calise and Musella, 2019) and "telepopulism", as much as it adds to them. The novelty claim, attention rather than power, would land with still greater force if defended explicitly against the supply-side tradition (Mudde, 2004; Albertazzi and Vampa, 2021), which has long held that leadership is one variable among several and that parties, not *personae*, do much of the explanatory work. The tension is a productive one: if the personalisation of politics matters above all because it tracks the erosion of the party as an organisation, then a framework that foregrounds attention rather than power leaves an inviting question for the author's next book.

A second and especially stimulating question concerns the attention and power distinction once Meloni is in office. The proposition that personality-driven politics is strong in attention but not in power fits the Berlusconi of spectacle and the Salvini of Facebook well; it is tested by Meloni "in government", where attention is precisely what is being converted into institutional power, through attempted constitutional reforms (the *premierato*), the entrenchment of executive leadership and the organisational consolidation of Fratelli d'Italia. A dissertation completed in 2024 could hardly anticipate the full arc of this governing phase, and the case usefully suggests that the cardinal distinction may be less a fixed property of the phenomenon than a variable dependent on the point in the political cycle (Bruno and Morini, 2026). Far from weakening the framework, this is an extension it readily accommodates.

A few further points invite development rather than detract from the achievement. The cases are chosen because they are the most visible, which raises the familiar issue of selection on the dependent

variable; the footnote on Mario Draghi registers it gracefully, and for an interpretive project the matter is not pressing, though it would weigh more were the democratic-effects question framed causally. The *personae*, vivid as they are, occasionally verge on the essentialist, and the gendered framing of Meloni as the "witch" might repay further reflection, given that her project has been built precisely on inverting the stigma of the outsider (Baldini et al., 2022). The hopeful thesis of revitalisation and re-enchantment, the book's most original wager, could be sharpened with an explicit threshold for distinguishing democratic revitalisation from authoritarian erosion (Urbinati, 2019). And for a study of Italy the apparatus, rich in political theory (Müller, 2016; Mair, 2013), might be complemented by closer engagement with the empirical scholarship on Italian parties and elections, where the picture of a weak party culture with little party loyalty would be qualified by the history of the DC and PCI subcultures.

None of this diminishes the accomplishment. On its own terms, as intellectual history and political theory, *Persona and Politics* is original, learned and genuinely ambitious, and it is written with a verve uncommon in doctoral work. Its strength lies in the boldness of its method and in its welcome refusal of "declinism"; the questions it leaves open, about the populism literature, about the attention and power distinction under the test of Meloni in office, and about its normative criteria, are the questions of a project rich enough to provoke them. It will be read with profit by anyone interested in the staging of power, and it deserves a readership well beyond the history of ideas. Read in 2026, the dissertation has gained rather than lost in interest: as Meloni consolidates an executive built around her own persona, and as personalised, party-light leadership spreads across Europe and the Atlantic, its framework supplies a vocabulary for naming what is unfolding before us, so that its one unresolved question, whether such politics finally undermines or revitalises democracy, now reads less as an academic puzzle than as a live political stake. It is, in conclusion, a stimulating and unusually well-crafted contribution that one hopes will soon find its way into print as a book.

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