

### **More Debates We Need to Have**

The Italians look bored. As a very tidy German scholar delivers his proposition on the "time-scapes" of the European Union—his pages of notes turning from one clean stack to another, perfectly parallel, his watch aligned in between—the Italians are twitching, text messaging, removing and replacing their (very fashionable) spectacles, nudging each other, whispering, eating Mentos. And these are the professors.

Predictable time cycles, our speaker reminds us, are a fundamental rhythm of democracy. Without a means of measuring political time, democracy cannot be democracy, but is rather something more authoritarian.

He offers us these insights in reference to Brussels, which has yet to synchronize its institutional clocks and to establish the political cycles to which citizens of the European democracy can set their watches.

His audience is fidgeting, not from boredom now, but agitation, from urgency, as they apply his analyses to their own nation—a country that has seen its government collapse nearly 60 times since the end of the Second World War and will form yet another one in a matter of days. Here we sit, biding our time for the elections that will decide whether Silvio Berlusconi merges his media empire with the Italian government for a third time in less than 15 years. Here rows of esteemed Italian political scientists are poising their mobile phones for action, digging at their scalps, reorganizing the items in their breast pockets, and someone is tapping the soles of his designer shoes to an eerily familiar tune.

Those of us around him believe we're mistaken at first, but when his toes reach the chorus, there can be no doubt: it is *Meno male che Silvio c'è*. "Thank Goodness there's Silvio," a karaoke style music video that features a ridiculous hymn for *il Presidente Berlusconi* (who incidentally is not the president yet) on top of a montage of smiling Italians doing allegedly Italian things, like eating gelato and spontaneously breaking into song. And though it is doubtful that this ode is one that even most Berlusconi voters take for gospel truth, it is a tune that is lodged in everyone's head. Some sing it with laughter, others hum with rage, but the song illustrates once again that Silvio Berlusconi knows—perhaps better than anyone else in the world—how to create a public sphere.

Democracy is not only about having a common measure of time, but also about having a sense of with whom we share that time. Mass media, for better or for worse, is how most of us develop that sense.

Presently, there is no "European" media venue that people rely on for their public awareness. And since now it is not just newspapers but also television programming, internet, and radio that drop the common thoughts into thousands (and millions) of minds at the same moment, we might only substitute the word "media" for "newspaper" to feel how true Alexis de Tocqueville's nineteenth-century insights remain: "[media] is an advisor who does not require to be sought, but who comes to you of its own accord and talks to you briefly every day... [Media] maintains civilization." And thus the media we rely on determines to a large extent what kind of civilization we have.

In his April 7 editorial for the *International Herald Tribune*, Henry Kissinger offers a laundry list of questions designed to begin "the debate we need to have": for example, what goals must America set for the world community, and can we require major countries to transform themselves in order to make progress "more reliable."

These questions hinge on the assumptions that the United States remains the world's "sole superpower," and that Europe is "stuck in a halfway status" that prevents it from contributing to international security. These assumptions, however, discourage us, US citizens, from reevaluating ourselves in the way that Europe already doing. These are assumptions that prevent us from developing the kind of community that Europe is in the process of developing—a community that can not and does not imagine itself to be organic or ordained, but instead one that must deliberate and pursue dialogue about how to create a much larger democratic polity that will respect and accommodate increasing diversity.

Every citizen may feel part of any number of communities, and loyalty to those communities—not just to a nation-state—is what motivates sacrifice. Europe is beginning to enable those communities to be more responsive. It is a false sense of what constitutes one's nation-state—as in Silvio Berlusconi's production of Italy as the real-life version of an Olive Garden commercial—which most often gets in the way.

We have much to debate, as Kissinger reminds us. But it will be terribly hard to begin these discussions without recognizing that we are all in flux. A democracy must measure time together, not freeze it. Just as facelifts, toupees, and music videos can't preserve the youth of the 71-year-old Berlusconi, our failure to examine changes in the structure of multi-national, multi-level governance will not endow our own nation-state any super powers.