

The Republican primary: garbage in/garbage out

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In his appreciation of the late Lucio Magri, the Italian Marxist and founder of the exemplary *Il Manifesto* newspaper, Perry Anderson tells the story in the most recent *New Left Review* of the trashing a young Magri took from Italian Communist Party elder Enrico Berlinguer for a speech Magri wrote that bordered on the substantive.

“Magri,” Berlinguer said, “you have yet to learn that in politics one needs the courage of banality.”

Leftists avoiding the Republican debates like the pox are missing some classic political banalities. And some quintessential propaganda moments, too. For a taste, here’s a bit of what former Mass. Governor and Republican presidential front runner Mitt Romney served up to supporters after clinching the New Hampshire party primary on Jan. 10.

“What defines us as Americans is our unwavering conviction that we know [things] must be better. . . . We still believe in the hope, the promise, and the dream of America. We still believe in that shining city on a hill. . . . President Obama wants to put free enterprise on trial... [He is] a leader who divides us with the bitter politics of envy. We must offer an alternative vision. I stand ready to lead us down a different path, where we are lifted up by our desire to succeed, not dragged down by a resentment of success. In these difficult times, we cannot abandon the core values that define us as unique—We are One Nation, Under God. . . . Our campaign is about more than replacing a President; it is about saving the soul of America. . . . [Obama] wants to turn America into a European-style entitlement society. We want to ensure that we remain a free and prosperous land of opportunity. . . . This President puts his faith in government. We put our faith in the American people.”

And while President Obama has done nothing but front for “free enterprise” and operate internationally with the same venal means as did his predecessor: threatening civil liberties in defense of homeland and hearth; conflating the national interest with corporate-class needs; and waging wars to secure the imperium, Romney attacks Obama because

“He doesn’t see the need for overwhelming American military superiority. I will insist on a military so powerful no one would think of challenging it. He chastises friends like Israel; I’ll stand with our friends. He apologizes for America; I will never apologize for the greatest nation in the history of the Earth.

There’s more: fulsome phrases about “destiny,” not “detours,” and “restoring American greatness,” but you get the idea.

Put this way, and Romney is a master of banality, his tropes effectively evoke damaging myths about America. It’s folklore the Democrats call on, too, if not so blatantly or so vulgarly: America a shining city on a hill (shades of Mario Cuomo, 1984); Europe foul with government excess and

pessimism; America clean and optimistic; the U.S. a beacon for economic freedom, while government intervention is suspect for anything beyond feeding the military and cossetting the arms industry.

Forget a revolutionary left. Where are the social democrats when we need them?

In a sense, Romney has nothing else to run on. And Obama will run as the non-Romney. Some democratic choice for voters!

Gene Debs, who knew the gaseous language of mainstream politicians was a cover for capital's rapacity, once said that the key to their winning elections wasn't their appeal to ideas, but sleight of hand. For Debs, the secret (and I'm paraphrasing) was pushing the candidate if the candidate is strong, featuring the platform if the candidate is weak, and having the band play loud if both candidate and platform did not impress.

Welcome to Campaign 2012. I can't wait for the Democratic response. And the band.