

Understanding Italian Politics: A Pause for Reflection

Stanton H. Burnett (January 10, 2008)



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Readers may have noticed a three-week delay in the arrival of a new column in this series. Worse yet, they may not have noticed it.

Such a pause is rare. In the series' former lives, including most recently during the short, brilliant



career of USItalia, these notes on how contemporary history, colorations of the Italian political culture, unwritten rules and habitual practices shed light on today's politics flowed easily. There was so much to talk about that I worried whether the second two hundred episodes would be as easy as the first two hundred. They rattled off the typewriter with (my) easy confidence that they were apt.

But, it must be admitted, this holiday season brought doubts, some serious, eggnog-supported reconsideration. We are told, by no less a voice than the New York Times (which, like most American papers, has trouble focussing on Italy if popes, earthquakes, or the Mafia are not involved), that Italy is tired, old, perhaps doomed. Indeed, her current neuralgia seems to have new elements, from deadly Asian commercial competition, to an aging, pension-demanding population, to a rainbow of crime syndicates from around the globe. Now the great garbage crisis has, uh, piled up into the ugliest mess imagineable, with organized crime and disorganized dumping leading to the closing of some schools in the south because the refuse had blocked the schoolyard gates. (It is a bad sign when a country's leader, in a situation where real citizens are truly suffering, mentions the nation's image first in his list of concerns.) And some of the faces confronting these problems are new, especially SuperWalter. So perhaps the rich, informative background we hoped to provide as a structure of understanding is simply passé. Perhaps the current scene is new and we are old.

Faced with the current level of economic, social and political malaise, there are some "outcomes", both felicitous and grave, to which a modern state might be subjected. For example, the nation could march to the polls and elect a new team to govern its way out of crisis. But Italy has severe handicaps blocking optimism about this outcome.

First, there is the current electoral system. One of the very few areas of broad agreement among Italian politicians is that the system is a failure and must be changed. At this point, agreement ends. While much of the debate swirls around the possible imitation of the German system, this surface argument covers the sharp pain of the real problem: no reform that is not an amazzapartitini reform, erasing more than half of the current parties from the political landscape, will ever provide the legislative wherewithal for the serious economic and social measures demanded by today's malady. How Italy got to this situation, and the dynamics of her patterns of coalition politics can only be explained by the explorations of history and culture we're attempting.

A second (this is not a list, but a sampling) roadblock to effective change through normal elections is the relationship between political leadership and citizen. The history of Italian politics does not match the principles of democracy outlined in civics textbooks. Although, as we have discussed in an early column, the large number of floating voters is a new phenomenon, the prevailing culture is still one of clientelismo. And for years, the main alternative to this client-and-provider relationship has been movement politics, not loose associations of citizens with some rough harmony of views on many issues, but the disciplined marshalling of coherent political forces tightly constrained by rules of loyalty. Neither of these styles makes for easy electoral replacement of one large party by another as a way of effecting change.

So the past, the political culture, some of the ongoing habits... they all conspire to hamper Italy's emergence from her current pain. But those same forces from the past also provide some important, often ignored, advantages. For example, many countries, with maladies no more serious than Italy's, have turned to demagogues or the military.

History has taught Italy to fear demagogues. When Bettino Craxi considered ways to be a more direct influence on Italian citizens, even via such apparently harmless innovations as televised "fireside chats", alarms sounded throughout the system, including within his own party. And Silvio Berlusconi may be a populist, but it would require a far higher dose of serious ideology to make of him even a bush-league demagogue. Extreme politics have been successfully marginalized, and it will be interesting to see how this was done, and how secure the prophylaxis is. (Very secure.)



Nor need we worry about the Italian military. Even despite the bad taste that Gladio and the involvement of some SISME brass with Licio Gelli's PS lodge left in our mouths, the Italian military establishment is, politically, exactly what a modern state should have, with leadership firmly committed to constitutional democracy. During my diplomatic days of the '70s and '80s, Washington worried regularly about the danger of a military coup, and we sent regular cables assuring the folks of Foggy Bottom that they were worried about the wrong thing. (They had equal difficulty worrying about the right thing, forever convinced that the Christian Democratic Party was a shining band of democratic, capitalistic America-lovers.)

Again, history, culture, habitual practices, unwritten rules, all worth examining, have provided the country, even in dark times, with good safeguards against either demagogues or military involvement in politics.

So we'll return to our path next week, all the while remembering that the fable of the boy who cried wolf has two morals, not one: don't sound unnecessary alarms, but, also, don't fail to respond to real alarms. In one of the simplifications that made him popular with Americans, Luigi Barzini said that Italians were the most pessimistic of all peoples, which is why they lived so brilliantly in the moment. However over-simplified that "analysis" may be, there's a grain of truth there. The old Russian joke was a response to "How are things?" The answer: "So-so. Worse than yesterday, better than tomorrow." I always thought it worked better as an Italian joke than a Russian joke.

An old friend, a sad-eyed Tuscan named Enzo, seeing fires blazing in 1968, thought the end was near: Italy, perhaps the West, was immediately doomed. In 1978 he told me that things had gotten so bad that the Italian republic could not survive another year. By 1988, seeing the final catastrophe right around the corner, all Enzo wanted was to get his family out before the country tumbled. In '98, the end of the Italian world had finally arrived, and all would sink before the end of the year. No need to call Enzo in 2008. I know what he'll say.

"Readers of i-Italy will be among the very few to have understood Clementina Forleo's strange recent remark that some people seem to be trying 'to make me out as crazy.' It clearly related to the Tiziana Parenti parallel discussed in Gothic Four."

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