



New Year's Resolution: Don't Be Too Grumpy about the Motherland

Maria Laurino (January 08, 2009)



With Barack Obama elected as president and Silvio Berlusconi back as prime minister, the differences between America and Italy seem greater than ever.

Here's my New Year's resolution: I want to stop being a grumpy Italian-American.

Because I've been feeling pretty grumpy toward the motherland these days.



My general malaise about Italy – rather than my usual “I love Italia” demeanor – started about a year ago, when Silvio Berlusconi was reelected as Prime Minister and Gianni Alemanno, a former neofascist, was elected mayor of Rome.

At the time, I wasn't feeling as frustrated about Italy's problems as I do today because Americans had George W. Bush as our president. Back then, both countries could be discussed together – who has it worse, I'd ask my Italian and Italian-American friends -- Americans or Italians? Americans usually won. While Berlusconi has made corruption and cronyism an even sturdier fabric in the Italian system, America's world power meant that we had harmed many other countries, not just our own.

But then something miraculous happened – Americans elected Barack Obama as their president. And from then on, I've become an incredibly grumpy Italian-American. I take Italy's problems personally because I see in Italian political leaders the traits of all the old relatives I knew growing up. Their fatalism, their provincialism, their wanting to horde all the goodies for themselves, their intrinsic belief that all is futile – these are traits that my relatives carried from the brutal poverty of their land a hundred years ago, yet these traits still seem to reign in Italy today.

There had been times of economic promise and hope in Italy, culminating in a position of power in the 1990s. But as Alexander Stille – probably the most thoughtful American commentator of contemporary Italy points out – the high levels of corruption, inefficiency, and bureaucratic waste that occurred since the end of World War II have caught up with the country today. Stille describes Italy as “paralyzed and dysfunctional, angry, fearful, intensely dissatisfied but unwilling to take any changes.”

Sounds like a Sunday dinner with the old relatives.

Stille also points out how the Berlusconi travesty only grows worse: In his current reappearance as prime minister, he has placed former show girls in the Italian Parliament. The New York Times reports how Berlusconi sues journalists (including Stille) who print anything negative about him, even if the facts have been well-documented. Berlusconi's millions enable him to harass journalists who must put up their own earnings to fight his charges in court. One English journalist eventually decided to remove criticism of Berlusconi from the Italian edition of his book, leaving the original copy only for the English versions. He said he couldn't afford the legal fees.

The Italian government is a circus; and the majority of Italian people are too cynical and tired to fight any longer. For eight long years, I was lulled into thinking that America was politically comparable to Italy – a country that could only make bad, ill-informed choices. But looking at the damage Italian political and mafia corruption have created – public projects that never get finished, garbage that doesn't get collected, land contaminated by toxic waste and illegal dumping – I have come to deeply appreciate the sturdier foundations of American democracy.

Then came the November election, and that watershed vote pointed out some fundamental differences between America and Italy.

Our pluralistic spirit can be heard in the voice of Walt Whitman, a spirit which has taken centuries to find root, but which is part of the American landscape. “Individual identity cannot thrive where some people count and others do not,” the great bard wrote. “The great word Solidarity has arisen. Of all dangers to a nation as things exist in our day, there can be no greater one than having certain portions of the people set off from the rest by a line drawn.”

Whitman knew we must move beyond “European chivalry, the feudal, ecclesiastical, dynastic world.” But has Italy ever disentangled itself from these roots?

What is the Italian immigration policy? A child born in Italy of immigrant parents is educated in the Italian school system, speaks and thinks in Italian, but at eighteen must return to the country of his parents and apply for citizenship!

Or consider the Northern League's (who are wary of both immigrants and southern Italians) awful



recent antics – such as calling for a Pork Day in Bologna to protest the city's decision to build a mosque.

For decades I've cherished Italy because it preserved the past in a world that rings in a new commercial product daily. But there are also many things worth discarding, and the Italian people have as much difficulty accepting change as my Old World relatives. So until I'm enchanted again by the smoothness of cobblestones under my feet, faded frescos in ancient churches, and a glass of wine in a secluded piazza on a summer night, I'll need to do some more work to fulfill my New Year's resolution.

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