

Moms, Jobs and Bamboccioni

Judith Harris (February 21, 2012)



A much debated issue has been the center of many discussions recently, the so-called "bamboccioni" are the young Italian adults who still live at home with their parents, cuddled and nurtured by their mothers.

ROME - American reporter Joe Queenan has just determined that, as the headline over his [Wall Street Journal](#) [2] article of Feb. 15 proclaims, "Italian Moms Are the Best." True, he was speaking of Italian-American mothers who are terrific cooks, so I admit to extrapolating to include all Italian mammas (of which I happen to be one, not to mention nonna of three nipotini).

Here's what he says: "I never met anyone who was more beloved by her kids than Mrs. Giardinelli, though she wasn't much different from all the other Italian-American mothers I have known. Italian-



American moms love their kids, they look out for their kids, they defend their kids, and because of that their kids generally grow up to be pillars of the community.”

(<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970204883304577221130871808026.html> [3])

Whoa! Not so long ago we were insulting the mamma italiana for creating a couple of generations of bamboccioni—that is, unemployed, unemployable and lazy youth. The word is a neologism, popularized a few years back by a Minister of the Economy, the late Paolo Padoa Schioppa. From bambino, child, the word is defined by an Italian dictionary (my translation) as “a man with infantile or spoiled behavior, immature.” In English it’s usually translated as “mama’s boy.”

But the meaning is slippery and changes with the times. Before the present economic crisis, the bamboccione was a beloved Italian institution and still socially acceptable enough for singer Francesco Friggione to celebrate him in a sarcastic but affectionate song whose lyrics go, “Come on, Mamma, make a risotto. Papa, I need fifty euros tonight for the disco. I’m lost without Mamma and Papa.... Hey, I’m stayin’ home with the folks, till I inherit.” (you can see and hear it at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X467cRITz mw> [4]). For the true bamboccione work was out of the question, and so an enterprising sofa manufacturer put up a giant billboard at streetside below the Parioli hill in Rome showing a youth stretched out and dozing on a sofa.

“For your bamboccione,” said the ad, intimating that (1) everyone has one at home, and (2) he (rarely she) warrants a comfy new sofa, not to mention laundry washed and ironed, pasta a-plenty and holidays in the Maldives with buddy bamboccioni and their assorted girlfriends, whose way would similarly be paid by adoring parents. An economy on the skids has put an end to all this, and, with Italy formally declared in recession following two quarters of negative growth, the figure of the bamboccione has tumbled into disgrace.

Michel Martone, the present undersecretary for Labor and Social Policies, called those young people who fail to be graduated from university by age 28 “sfigati” (lazy slobs). Even Premier Mario Monti’s preaching that a guaranteed job-for-life was “monotonous,” was taken as insinuating that many of Italy’s young people want an easy life rather than hard work. Labor Minister Elsa Fornero ground it in further by declaring that young people should not be afraid of seeking work far from home—and then it was pointed out that her own daughter works in the same university which employs both Fornero and her husband.

Not surprisingly, being written off as “bamboccioni” and “sfigati” brought a flood of recriminations from the hordes of educated and underpaid or unpaid young people who work or are seeking work. “We are being humiliated,” one wrote on a blog site. “Martone shows he does not understand the Italian university system.” Other angry young people explained that, where there are limited places to enter university, those with recommendations have been filling the quotas at the expense of those without.

The statistics once again tell the story. On Thursday the national statistics agency ISTAT revealed that, among those between 18 and 29 years of age, jobs have dropped by 2.5% the past quarter over the same period last year. This translates into a loss of some 80,000 jobs for young people over the past year. Young women are worse off than the men, with only one out of two employed and, in the South, only one out of three. The sad truth is that Italy has let its youth slip between the social cracks. “Until yesterday young people were a symbol of the future, of progress, of a tomorrow that is already here and a motor of the economy—of consumption and consumers, but they’ve now gone out of fashion....

Young people in Italy no longer represent the future,” commentator Ilvo Diamanti wrote in an op ed in [La Repubblica](#) [5] Feb. 13. Not surprisingly, employers shy away from giving lifetime contracts. The trade unions defend workers, yet represent only those who have these contracts. No one has been speaking for the young Italians who have been forced into bamboccione-hood. The government is aware of this, and Minister Fornero, promoting a reform of the labor market at a meeting in Brussels of the [EU Council](#) [6] of social affairs and employment, spoke in favor of “a greater participation of youth, women and older workers.”

The government has a number of proposals to be discussed in coming weeks with the labor unions



and with industry:--to introduce a broader type of apprentice system--to devise a system of unemployment benefits;--to revise the rigid contract system. The latter is particularly important. Says Fornero: "Too many types [of contract] have over the years created the widespread precarious system among youth.... A battle against youth unemployment is our priority." It is to be hoped; no one wants to see the sort of street rioting of Athens. But old ways die hard. Newspaper writers here still speak of a man pushing 30 as a "youth," and too many Italian leaders still refuse to make way for newcomers.

This is a country where old people are still revered and still in command, which may help to explain why so many Italians infantilize their young people, and many young people allow themselves to be treated like children. From political parties to trade unions, many of these leaders look more suited to floating on a golden pond than to leading Italy into a future which will need the help of every last one of its educated, talented young people.

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