

Politics & the Piazza

Judith Harris (October 28, 2014)



The Piazza as a political forum, from the empires to the contemporary democracies... passing through dictatorships.

The late British classicist [Henry Kitto](#) [2] held that the ancients had little formal democracy, but that their meeting to argue out their problems at the stoa in Athens or a forum in Rome was essentially democratic, whereas the modern British, with their formal democracy, tend to speak only across backyard picket fences. For Professor Kitto, yammering away, arguing, quarreling, and joking in a piazza constitute a real and valuable road to democracy.

This concept was driven home to me when touring Sicily by car with a friend in 1965. At sunset we heard a drum beating across a valley. Drawn by the steady throbbing, we drove up a winding road to a tiny hilltop town where we saw that the drummer had summoned farm workers, many of them illiterate, to the piazza to hear the evening newspaper being read aloud. Afterward a lively debate began, exactly as Professor Kitto had said.

The architecture of urban life in Italy, still focuses around the piazza, continues to work toward guaranteeing that its diverse standards of living do not isolate people. And what a gift that is, even when the people in the piazza run amok, as was not infrequent in the early Seventies.

In May of 1969, the [Rome Daily American](#) [3] sent me to cover an anti-Vietnam war demonstration during a visit by President Richard Nixon. Demonstrations were scheduled, and police had to protect the American Embassy on Via Veneto. Helping them were several organized squads of right-wing extremists yielding brickbats. After hundreds of demonstrators were forced from Via Veneto toward Piazza della Repubblica, police cars whirled in a circle, sealing the demonstrators as if in a ring. The only sound was a stampede of running feet.

“What are you doing here?” shouted one of the organizers. I was six months pregnant, and terrified. I showed him my press credentials. “Okay. Stay with us,” he said, drawing me toward an inner circle.

These days the piazzas are by and large calm, and favorite haunts of Italians and tourists both. Traffic has always been barred from many, such as St. Mark’s in Venice, which thrive as open-air living rooms. These open spaces are in marked contrast with the Anglo-Saxon concept of a park, such as Washington Square Park, crisscrossed by lanes.

The Italian piazza is an outgrowth of the temple complexes of Greco-Roman antiquity. Many stood within a walled compound and had treasuries containing valuable votive offerings, so that gates were locked at night for security. The transformation from temple compound to busy piazza with a secular function is nicely illustrated at ancient Pompeii, where the older, simpler Greek temple to Apollo within its walls runs alongside the later, larger Roman forum. Centered on its temple to the Capitoline gods, that forum still has walls and gates but is expanded so that flanking the temple are business offices, an elementary school, a public latrine, warehousing, and local government offices.

This configuration—church, town hall, place of business—continued throughout Italy. During the Renaissance it was the scene of political and religious choreographed events. The Reformation changed its architecture so that the piazza became a propagandistic, theatrical setting for the beleaguered Catholic Church. Personal propaganda was an important function: under Pope Innocent X, Piazza Navona, where his Pamphilj family owned a palazzo, was revamped with Bernini’s Fountain of the Four Rivers as its focal point. The goal was family prestige, and indeed, for a time the piazza was called the Pamphilj Forum.

Under Mussolini, handsome new cities were built in the Pontine area south of Rome, replete with piazzas. There, the town hall, rather than the church, was designed to be the primary focus.

But even then people conversing, dialoguing, quarreling, and enjoying each other remained at the real heart of the piazza.



Imitation is the finest form of flattery, of course. Proof came in a visit last week to a year-old gigantic and stylish mall complex in Glendale, California.

Its centerpiece is, guess what, a sprawling piazza with a large traditional fountain encircled by outdoor cafes and a small green where children play and grown-ups do tai chi on Sunday mornings. Evviva la piazza!

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