

A darkening Picture: Painting Today's Italy by Numbers

Judith Harris (February 05, 2008)



Eurispes, the independent Italian research institute, presented its annual report on the state of the Italian economy and society.

The whole great garbage disaster has become such a visual mud-slinger, even at home, that RAI TV's Channel One is running a daily news slot entitled *Non solo immondizie* (Not only garbage). The point is to show the good things Italians do in the world and hence to discourage civic shame despite it all—despite the daily scenes of police struggling to contain stone-throwing Neapolitan citizens, despite the photos of women in face masks carrying groceries past garbage mountains, despite the continued school closures on health grounds. Indeed, the picture that made the most news—get ready for it—was of a street that was entirely clean.

Most pleasantly, *Non solo immondizie* has turned out to be more than a homeboy-pride reaction to outsiders' needling. This is serious soul searching, something more than a smug display of Italian foods, fashions and Florentine paintings. Indeed, one of the justly famous Italian entrepreneurs interviewed seized the occasion to plead for honesty in government, for better schools and for jobs



for youth.

Such thoughtful soul-searching was also in evidence when Eurispes, the independent Italian research institute, presented its annual report on the state of the Italian economy and society January 25. Not a seat was vacant in the vast auditorium of the National Library in Rome as Eurispes president Gian Maria Fara pulled no punches: "Italy is a country held hostage," he told the audience of journalists and academics, which broke into applause again and again. "It's a country taken prisoner by a political class which has buried society underneath a thickening blanket that blocks all movement, every possibility for action, every desire for change and modernity. It progressively reduces the space for democracy, it mortifies vocations, talents, merits, expectations and the aspirations of millions of citizens....Fifteen years after the birth of the Second Republic we're regretting the demise of the First."

Once upon a time, rightly or wrongly, Italian politicians were considered the very essence of Italian intelligence—the country's brain, he went on to say. But no longer: "Politics itself has become a hostage," and the politicians' hold on power has increased in an inverse proportion to their capacity to resolve problems. As a result, one citizen out of two today mistrusts the political class, the law and justice system, and the trade unions as well. Even the Church has lost over one-tenth of its consensus in the past year, dropping in citizens' esteem from the 60.7% of 2006 to the 49.7% of 2007.

The economy is in disarray, with Italy vaunting the largest black economy in Europe, the equivalent of the GNP of Poland, Finland, Portugal, Hungary and Romania altogether. The criminal economy alone, estimated at E. 175 billion, amounts to "a state within a state," which distorts the rest of the economy. In its wake the increase in the criminal economy has generated a return to the cash economy, so as to dodge the tax man, according to Eurispes.

Elsewhere, in the more conventional world of business and industry, salaries lag behind those in the rest of Europe, where wages have risen by 15% over the past three years. In Italy, the average annual rise during that same period was of 4.1%, or around 12% in three years.

The newest phenomenon in the labor force is a class of "the new invisible people"—men and women who are fully employed, dress neatly to go to professional jobs, but earn too little to survive. Citing figures of the Bank of Italy, the "invisible poor" category takes in fully 15% of all those employed. They tend to be female and young, with 21% having completed a high school and 7% holding a university degree. Their plight "produces discomfort and fractures...[and] a degree of uncertain and insecurity without precedent." Although the report did not say this, many of these invisible poor are the ones who make the outside world laugh at their still living at home at thirty-five. "Poverty is spreading in the country, and it is ever younger," the report acknowledged.

Industrial productivity was disappointing. Although it rose during the past year by 1.3%, throughout the entire five preceding years productivity had actually fallen on average by 0.7% annually, so that, in the past six years, it has declined by 2.2%. "The performance of a business is inversely correlated with the age of the head of the company," according to the report, pointing out, however, that most recently the number of under-35's entering business, especially in chemicals and rubbers, has increased.

Italy's notoriously elephantine public sector is largely a special prerogative of female workers, who make up 52.7% of the total, by contrast to their lesser proportion (under 39%) of the total work force. Both male and female workers in the public sector are getting long in the tooth; one out of every six of those fully employed in the public sector is over 46, up two years over 2001 figures. The median age of the supervisors (*i dirigenti*) had climbed to 48.4; eliminating health care workers, the average supervisor was 53 years old. Not coincidentally, the under-35's holding jobs in the state or local bureaucracy were 31% of all those employed in 1990, but in 2003, a scant 9%.

The Eurispes analysis also gave evidence of the extent to which the Italian family is reeling from the economic pinch, with only one in three questioned saying that they can make it to the end of the month. The number of families applying for personal loans has doubled in the past year, from 5% to 10%. Buying on time is no longer unusual; indebtedness rose by nearly 10% in the first semester of



2007 over the same period of 2006, and parents report buying even school text books on credit. Whereas fat savings accounts were once the proud Italian norm, today only one in seven families (13.6%) is able to put money aside at the end of the month. Some of this we already knew: shortly before Christmas reports were arriving of middle-aged white-collar men standing in line for free meals.

One of the sadder elements that leaps from the Eurispes pages is the continuation of a North-South gap. In Sicily almost 31% of families fall below the official poverty line; in the North the figure is generally 6% (Lombardy, Veneto, Trento, Emilia) and 7.1% in Piedmont. The Southern Italian poor also have larger families and far less schooling than in the North. One out of ten Southern Italians read over seven books a year, while in the North the figure is one in three. And in the North the number of poor families whose head of family is under 35 were under 5% , but five times that in the South.

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