

A Winter of Discontent

Judith Harris (December 21, 2007)



Journalist and writer Judith Harris, in Rome, starts her collaboration with i-Italy and offers her reflections on Ian Fisher's New York Times article on Italy's "funk".

ROME - Down at the outdoor market at Campo de' Fiori in Rome today it was clear that winter is here, for artichokes had finally appeared, albeit at a stunning price of \$1.60 apiece, a 20% hike over last year. The recent truckers' strike has pushed up all food prices just in time for Christmas dinner, and shoppers were truculent.

Inside my usual café on a corner of the Campo it was also wintry, as in talk of Italy's winter of



discontent. A New York Times article Dec. 13 cited a poll purportedly showing that Italians are dismal in spirit and generally adrift. At the café many agreed. “We’ve been sitting on our laurels for a long time now,” said Paola, who has a shoe store just off the Campo. “We’re going nowhere.”

But others here are eager to rebut the Times. Last Sunday an often raucous comic from Piedmont named Luciana Littizzetto turned serious. In a heated counter-attack on TV Three’s *Tempo Che Fa*, she said that the Americans may be right about Italy going to seed, but at least the Italians don’t go around shooting people at random in shopping malls and schools. So there, take that, America.

This long-time observer of Italy (perhaps participant in Italy is more correct) has long believed that Italy is, as Paola said in the café this morning, resting on its laurels, and resting with smug self-satisfaction at that. The other night, as we discussed the Times article, I complained that what it said is obvious, but the why is more pertinent and also more difficult to grasp. It is also useful to factor into the misery equation other West European nations. French society is not particularly better off, or more creative; and as for relatively wealthier Britain, the troubles ahead in that poly-religious society, where the urban-countryside clash is painful to watch, and Gordon Brown is floundering, are all too obvious.

It is consoling that despite Asian competition innovative manufacturers have made Italy more present internationally than ever. As a regional survey of Italian exports between January and September shows, exports actually rose between 10.6 and 18 percent over the same period of 2006, according to the national statistics-gathering agency ISTAT (www.istat.it/english/calendar2007 [2]).

On the other hand, few would argue that Italy today faces some extremely serious problems. Aside from the generally abysmal tone of political exchanges (not least the anonymous delivery of bullets to three sitting cabinet ministers Wednesday), they begin with Italian mass education, whose belated arrival, post-1965, is still beached on the rocky shore of 19th century rhetoric. Recent polls here are troubling: 50% of Italian middle school students cannot synthesize what they have read, and only a slightly lower number can do elementary math. So let’s try to sort out which fundamental problems are holding back the country.

1. The lack of teaching of basic logic. The Seventies produced an excess number of teachers from technical training schools, who had received a smattering of business and law but who turned out to be unemployable. More or less charitably they were given jobs in public schools teaching math, but since they did not know how to teach math, they flopped. The result: students at a critical age failed to learn simple logic.

2. The lack of jobs for young people who remain at home unemployed into their thirties. This is not funny although outsiders are usually amused by it. As a result of this, as a front-page comment in the financial daily *Il Sole-24 Ore* said recently, young people do not accumulate the work experience they need, they do not accumulate the money, and by the time they find a job, they’ve



already lost their verve and creativity. An old friend who finally became a university professor at La Sapienza confirmed this: “I had to struggle so hard to get here, I no longer care about being here.” Who to blame? Begin with the trade unions—but not only.

3. The lack of a minimum required for a political party’s representation in Parliament. The current plethora of mini-parties cedes too much power to narrow minority interests, however worthy. Under desultory discussion is to amend the political process by introducing a 5% minimum for representation in Parliament. Without this, tiny minorities have a stranglehold, and the governing process is stalemated.

4. The lack of honesty within the political system. Those attacked for corruption always scream that it is a political attack, but this is obviously ridiculous in the case of the general in the Finance Guards corps who made state helicopters and boats available to freeloading politicians for August trips to Capri and other vacation spots, when Parliament was out of session. Nor were all from the far right. Such arrogant corruption is an affront (not to say dissuasion) to anyone paying taxes.

5. The lack of pudor. In a telephone conversation June 21, 2007 (to hear it, select www.repubblica.it [3] and then under, politica, “colloquio telefonico”), former Premier Silvio Berlusconi pleads for bosomy actress Evelina Manna to be given a starring role in a RAI TV production. The request, Berlusconi explains, was on behalf of an unnamed potential turncoat center-left coalition Senator. Explanation: in the Senate, the left alliance survives but barely; in a confidence vote Dec. 6 the government survived there by just two votes, 160 to 158.

And by the way, what other nation can vaunt a government whose ministers and their deputies total over one hundred people? Shame, shame, shame.

6. The lack of willingness to accept apparently menial jobs and build upon them. A few years ago a single Sikh was hired to work on an archaeological dig near Rome, and today he and 24 others of his family and neighbors from back home have developed into a team of skilled archaeological restorers. “In many areas Italians simply won’t do stoop labor,” was the analysis of the late Professor Paolo Sylos-Labini. “It’s a medieval attitude.” He identified a lack of work ethic to those geographical areas where rainfall was scarce and wheat the main commodity, meaning backbreaking labor for short periods and long periods of indolence.

Judith Harris is an American expatriate who has lived in, observed, and written about Italy for many years. She has reported for BBC, Time Magazine and NBC, and has recently published [Pompeii Awakened: A Story of Rediscovery](#) [4].

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