

A Brief Return to Rationalism

Maria Laurino (February 06, 2009)



How British rationalists first soothe, then make me seethe.



A few weeks back, I talked about my anger with contemporary Italy. I lamented the complacency and weary acceptance that's taken place, which has led to the reelection of Silvio Berlusconi as prime minister and the inability to thwart the desires of entrenched interests.

As I mentioned in an earlier blog post, when I get annoyed at fatalistic Italians I have an odd knee-jerk reaction: I read English rationalists. I find their cool composure and emotional distance an antidote to my high opera inheritance.

This time, I've turned to Bertrand Russell writing about the importance of idleness (to be fair, my reading of Russell is also in response to what I've seen take place in my own country in the past few decades – the demand for more and more productivity with only a tiny minority enjoying the fruits of this American labor).

Although Russell's ideas sometimes border on the wacky, he can also be brilliant, formidable, and make enormous sense. Writing in the 1930s, his words couldn't be more prescient: "The notion that the desirable activities are those that bring a profit has made everything topsy-turvy."

Or this: "...the world is suffering from intolerance and bigotry, and from the belief that vigorous action is admirable even when misguided; whereas what is needed in our very complex society is calm consideration, with readiness to call dogmas into question and freedom of mind to do justice to the most diverse points of view."

I nod along, amazed by how his words apply to both our current fiscal woes and the mess of the Iraq war. But then, one hundred pages later, I come across this observation in an essay about American homogeneity:

"Take, for example, what the schools do to southern Italians. Southern Italians have been distinguished throughout history for murder, graft, and aesthetic sensibility. The Public Schools effectively cure them of the last of these three, and to that extent assimilate them to the native American population, but in regard to the other two distinctive qualities, I gather that the success of the schools is less marked."

Wow.

And that observation comes from one of the greatest British minds of the twentieth century.

At least Francis Ford Coppola didn't allow the schools to rob him of his aesthetic sensibility, thus enabling him to beautifully portray those first two qualities and forever embed them in the American imagination.

So much for English rationalists to distract me from Italian dysfunction. I close the book amazed by stereotypes that were once bandied about in intellectual conversation.

English rationalism. Italian fatalism. I need to find, in Russell's own words, "a balanced adjustment of opposing tendencies."

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