

Lo straniero (Part Two)

Douglas Grant Mine (January 04, 2010)



Second and final part of an article by Douglas Grant Mine, an American writer, former foreign correspondent and resident of Le Marche. A disenchanted, though loving look at Italy from an American citizen married to an Italian wife and raising three children who consider themselves fully engaged members of both societies.

It's maddeningly paradoxical, though, Italians' admiration for the way democracy is practiced in America. Because throughout the two scant generations of their young, post-Fascist republic, citizens of this nation have consistently voted for the same sort of aged and aging mediocre, self-aggrandizing and easily corruptible males who have formed the political caste - La Casta - so damningly depicted as entrenched and unaccountable in a best-selling 2006 [book](#) [2] of the same title.

Italians know they are poorly governed at just about all administrative levels. And when they see Americans make an inspiring democratic exclamation that sets the country on a new and better



course, they celebrate along with them. They laud and congratulate and even envy them. But very few entertain the idea that something similar is possible here.

Here, the way things are is very similar to the way they have been. And to the way they will be.

It's like there's a background chorus of rhetorical questions posed alla Obama: "Can we defeat the brutal gangsters who've been sucking the country's lifeblood for a century? ... Can we elect representatives with a vocation for service who'll put the interests of the citizens ahead of their own? ... Can we get the mountains of stinking garbage off the streets of Naples? ... Take back our soccer stadiums from hooligans? ... Embrace the ethnic and religious diversity that is the hallmark of the New Europe?"

And the answer comes, again and again, not resoundingly but in a muffled, exasperated, defeated-sounding sigh: "No. Non possiamo."

According to analysis from various quarters, organized crime is stronger now in Italy than ever. Confesercenti, the principal association of small businesses, said in a recent report that the four main mafias rack up annual receipts of more than \$165 billion, mainly through extortion, loan-sharking, smuggling, robbery, gambling and the counterfeiting of famous-brand goods. That figure, which translates into some \$85 billion in profits, would make organized crime the single biggest segment of the Italian economy, representing about 7 percent of the Gross Domestic Product.

Two dozen sitting legislators have been convicted of crimes, mostly relating to their own illicit enrichment. They don't resign and are not booted out. The country's third biggest city, Naples, has been living under what is euphemistically called a garbage "emergency" for years. Meaning that the inhabitants of a major metropolis and cultural center of an industrialized Western European democracy have been obliged to get used to walking past mounds of rotting refuse. Fathers do not take their sons to big-city soccer stadiums for fear of the violence that regularly erupts between groups of rival fans, who even when blood is not shed compete to see which side can put on the most sustained spectacle of vulgarity and loutishness, often punctuated by overtly racist denigration of the black players on the field.

The head of government, Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, is a former cruise ship lounge singer who made billions of dollars by excelling at the shady - often non-competitive and corrupt - way big business was practiced here among politically connected cronies, palm-greasers and kissers of cheeks both fore and aft. He owns much of the media, wears lifts in his shoes, sets aside affairs of state to jet off to Switzerland for a facelift and hair transplant, and not long ago recommended to a recent college graduate given the chance to ask him about job prospects for young people such as herself: "Since you're so pretty, I'm sure you'd have no trouble finding someone rich to marry."

He thinks he's funny. That's understandable, because for the past 30 or so years he's been surrounded by sycophants and subordinates who laugh at his dumb jokes, a couple racially-tinged ones of which went over like lead balloons with the American couple residing in the White House.

Lately he has been accused of serially entertaining high-priced prostitutes in his palatial homes and dallying with an aspiring model 54 years his junior. She calls him "Daddy." His wife has filed for divorce, saying she cannot remain married "to a man who frequents underage girls."

"Non è un paese serio." It is a comment you hear over and over again in conversations at cafes, at bus stops or dinner parties. "It's not a serious country." Or: "If this were a serious country ..."

It seems incredible to non-Italians, but an astounding number of citizens of this country do not take their own nation seriously, at least not nearly as seriously as they take the quotidian enjoyment of delicious food and leisure time that affords them the gregarious company of family and friends.

So should I be happy about becoming a citizen of this land? Or seeing my sons grow more Italian with each passing year?

Well, the answer to those questions will probably hang in the air, half-hidden, for a couple decades.

But, like I said. I'm not sorry we came.

Our boys are good kids, in so many ways. And some of those ways are ones that they would not have had access to had we stayed forever in the States.

They all know how to fold and pinch the cappelletti stuffed pasta that, served in beef broth, is a traditional Christmas-season dish here in Le Marche. Every December our kitchen becomes a pasta factory, with Bruno cranking out the sheets of dough, Joe running the pizza-cutter up and down and across to make the squares, Toby placing pinches of the three-meat stuffing on the grid and then everyone picking up the pieces one by one and executing the little origami-like move that makes each delicious "little hat."

They all know their Nonna Elvira's stories - many told over food-preparation tableaux like this



one – about the hardships of WWII when the allies were advancing up the peninsula and British and American bombers were pounding the German-occupied cities and the people had spread out in the countryside, sleeping in barns and gathering wild greens.

There you go. There are two big elements of life – food, and the role of the elderly – that say a lot about any society. The weight people give them and how they fit into the bigger picture. And in those spheres, Italians have it all over the U.S.

In spades.

Beppe Carpi is a middle-aged longtime bank employee from Rimini, Fellini's hometown on the Adriatic coast, who for the past several years has spent much of his free time caring for his elderly mother disabled by diabetes and other illnesses.

"I'm just giving back to her what she gave to me when I was small and helpless. Now it is she who is helpless," he says over a simple meal of the regional piadina flatbread folded around sausage or steamed greens and stracchino cream cheese.

Assisted living facilities and old folks' homes and the whole idea of packing the infirm elderly off into the care of strangers are notions that have not taken hold on this peninsula. Because Italians' principal loyalty – before that which they feel toward nation or even the Catholic Church – is to their family. And not the nuclear one. La famiglia easily encompasses distant cousins, great-aunts and in-laws who remain hooked into the clan even after the death of the blood relative whose marriage established the original tie.

I have three first cousins in the States. I'm in touch with only one of them. And as far as my brothers' wives' siblings, well, I couldn't even tell you how many of them there are. Here in Italy, you find yourself around a table with those relations not infrequently. You do them favors, small or large, that are returned.

Or not. Because the favor you did was not predicated on eventual reciprocation. It was done simply because that is the way things work here.

It's true that such bonds and whatever implicit obligations they might entail contribute to nepotism, which is an age-old and festering problem. But when family allegiance is not abused – and most of its manifestations are mundane and inconsequential in any larger scheme of things – it is consistently lovely to behold.

Isn't that – the willingness a priori to make a sacrifice for a member of your extended family – an ideal? Of course many Americans take care of their elderly parents, and others bend over backwards to help a nephew find a job, or provide him a room if his university is in the uncle's town. We just don't do it as much as Italians do.

We also don't eat nearly as well. Not just in terms of flavor. But with regard to health, too. You don't see many fat people in Italy. Which is no small matter.

Two other things, both in the realm of the ideal of fairness: education and health care. They are national systems here.

Spending per student has nothing to do with the property tax base of the school district, a *modus operandi* in the States that makes for excellent schools in well-off areas and bad ones in poor regions and inner cities. Where's the democracy in that scheme of things? If the quest for success and self-realization is a race, then isn't the U.S. educational system assigning different starting lines to kids according to the relative affluence of their neighborhoods? Is that fair?

In Italy, spending per student, the curriculum and the overall quality of teachers is pretty much the same in the working-class outskirts of Bari as it is in the wealthy suburbs of Verona.

Private schools barely exist here, and often are diploma mills for troubled kids who can't make it through the public institutions.

Top-notch hospitals in the United States offer facilities and expertise and technology unsurpassed by any nation on the planet. The billionaire Berlusconi, when he needed surgery in 2006 to correct an irregular heartbeat, went to the Cleveland Clinic rather than undergo treatment in his homeland.

But such care is provided in the United States according to a discriminatory curve having to do with wealth and the quality of one's insurance, providing one has insurance. While hospitals and doctors in Italy, overall, are quite good. And every single person in this nation is covered by a national plan that assures citizens, and non-citizens, that they will be cared for at near-zero out-of-pocket expense. That fact provides people an underlying tranquility stemming from the knowledge that injury or illness will not eat up their life savings or leave them desperate and alone.

Another point for Italy in the realm of simple fairness, human solidarity and civility. So maybe fretting, even if it's passive and occasional, about the degree of my sons' attachment to "the land of the free and home of the brave" is a waste of time. It probably is.



Overall, I'm OK here, and OK with the prospect of my kids becoming more Italian than American. I'll take the bad along with the good, and they will, too. Which is what you have to try to do wherever it is that you live. Right?

And when I do get my citizenship, I'll use it to vote. Maybe help kick some bums out of office. That'll feel good.

Douglas Grant Mine, along with Nicoletta Spendolini, his Marchigiana wife, publishes a magazine for middle-school aged kids (www.scarpecotte.com [3]). They are aided in that enterprise by their sons Bruno, Joseph and Tobias (15, 14 and 13), who have lived for long stretches in both the United States and Italy and consider themselves fully engaged members of both societies.

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