2011

Social picture and trends

CENSIS

45th ITALY TODAY

FRANCOANGELI

Translation is by: Aminda Leigh, Silvia Guglielmi, Nicholas Hunt, Marina Astrologo.

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I. GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

1. In the last few months we have witnessed a clear degeneration of Italy's image with a painful mixture of tiredness and shame, to quote Cicero (*partim dolore, partim verecundia*), caused by the decline of the country's economic and political power in international and European affairs.

Italians have certainly paid the price for a three-pronged failing: the accumulation of a huge public debt over many decades, meaning Italy is no longer able to operate autonomously; the discovery that it was politically unprepared for an attack by speculators, who viewed Italian public finances as the weak link in an incomplete European system; and many months of confused and impotent government efforts to defend and re-launch the country's economy.

It is hard to assess which of these three weaknesses was the largest factor in the continual blame being piled upon Italy; and it's pointless to guess how much our competitors and allies applied pressure and adopted wily tactical maneouvering in all this. In the end, Italians were publically humiliated as Italy was virtually put into administration and we were subjected to personal slurs going way beyond the bounds of decency.

Nevertheless, it is pointless to appeal to national pride when we failed to invoke it at the right time, though it is never too soon to revive this sentiment. A renewed sense of duty to be credibile on the international stage, which has emerged in the past few weeks, does not seem to be matched with a corresponding duty to take a long hard look at ourselves, to understand the basic building blocks of the problems we face, on the basis of the old Hasidic teaching: "The crucial dialogue is between man and man".

2. Indeed, the facts force us to acknowledge the levels to which Italian society has been proved to be weak, isolated and partly heteronomous (i.e. ruled by others) in these last few months.

Perhaps for the first time in decades Italy's weakness lies in an external crisis, the lack of governance of global finance. But it is also manifest internally by a feeling of collective fatigue, a lack of reaction to the domestic side to the crisis (falling employment and consumption) and an inert fatalism about the unsolvable nature of the public debt problem. At the height of the 2008-2009 crisis, Italy weathered the storm better than everyone else, gaining a good reputation internationally. But in spite of that, it is now unexpectedly weak: floundering about trying to protect the factors underpinning that good reputation, and in an even worse mess regarding decisions that should and could stimulate development again.

This complicated state of trepidation is not helped by Italy's isolation. This is a society that achieved post-war reconstruction, went through an economic boom and industrialization (in terms of mass production as well as quality) rooted in the bedrock of a renewed sense of belonging in western society, it had a nascent leading role in Europe and a global presence for the Made in Italy brand. But today, it now seems excluded from major international affairs; at best it struggles to keep pace. Italy has lost the power it once had as a founding partner in the construction of Europe; it does not have the strength to fully meet its responsibilities in Western alliances; it is not participating in events on its doorstep in Northern Africa; it has no systematic relations with the rampant free riders of the global economy (at best, these links are fostered by the many small- and medium-sized businesses with bases around the globe); and it is losing the opportunity to be present in the axis penetrating South East Europe, with the delay of the Lyon-Turin railway connection and the difficulties of turning Northeastern Italy into the logistical hub for that penetration. Perhaps Italy has still not yet adapted to the end of bipolarity between the West and the Soviet Union, which made it so central and gave it a pivotal and expedient geopolitical role for decades. In the meantime, Italy's increasing isolation has not been helped by the propensity in recent years to allow all its international relations to be personalized at the top of the command chain; indeed this probably aggravated the situation.

A weak and isolated country is inherently open to others stepping in to make decisions for it: if you're not in the club, you can't even negotiate. When it comes to having a voice in decision-making circles Italy is at the mercy of events, with no proactive spirit, merely trying to hold down a first line of defense against what is happening around it or raining down on it from outside. The only thing left to do is to follow rules and programs devised by outsiders on high. These actions are driven by sociopolitical positions that are often extraneous to specifically Italian characteristics, with our multiplicity

of players and behaviors. The tendency of EU institutions to dictate the agenda, virtually forcing Italy to do its "homework", proves the level of subordination into which it has more or less consciously fallen. Accompanying this, there are signs of depression, both psychological (expressed in terms of decline) and even anthropological, which make Italians feel eternally condemned to a mediocre fate. It will be hard, also for those in government in the near future, to encourage commitment to responsible self-management and renewed self-esteem.

3. To understand what underlies the weak, isolated and heteronomous nature of Italian society today, we need to do some soul searching to understand why our age-old strengths – the collective ability to continually adapt and the spontaneous processes of self-regulation (in the sphere of consumption as well as welfare and business strategy) – no longer work as they once did.

Once again, reality forces us to recognize we are having trouble applying adaptation and self-regulation because there is a huge disarray of ideas, decisions and language:

– of ideas due to an absence of a sufficiently overarching evaluation of the crisis (we are at the mercy of events as they happen, held to ransom by news reports and even stock market bulletins), resulting in a worrying fragmentation of thought;
– of decisions because we are all forced, with greater or lesser conviction, to tackle events using somewhat improvised reasoning and tools (pointless budgets and laws), which are thus incapable of mobilizing concrete collective commitments. We chase after the daily, actually "the dailies", increasingly at the mercy of unforeseen events, with the collective psychology failing to appropriately reflect on the issues;
– of language because we express ourselves using concepts and terms that have nothing to do with the real worries of collective life (just think of the recent predominance of terms like default, rating, spread etc.), and in the end we associate ourselves with the cultures and interests driving those concepts and terms, but from the position of prisoners.

It's plain to see that this disarray causes a fatal decline in the sociopolitical debate. Leaving aside the trivial focus on problems caused by a bewilderingly weak leadership, the paucity of debate is clear. It seems to follow the logic of "talking for talking's sake" or "speaking about speaking", which makes collective thought pretty insubstantial. In fact, it could almost be defined as "barren thought", not even deserving of the old, criticized yet now not entirely unattractive label "feeble thought".

4. It is impossible to think we can continue to be neglectful and remain inert in the face of this regression in our social, economic and civic development, merely mournful for past growth and nurturing the doubt that "not only hope, but our desire for dear illusion has vanished", to quote Italian poet Giacomo Leopardi.

Over recent weeks, moves have been made in the political and institutional spheres; from our point of view, we think it is worthwhile repeating what we stressed twelve months ago: the need and essential hope for a "return to desire" as a enzyme to inject in the social fabric, the collective culture and in individual behaviors. And today we believe there has been further confirmation of that need and underlying interpretation, given that we still observe factors such as the "mushy" society and anthropological unease, which accentuate the dispersion and rising fragmentation of individuals. We risk a life, which we already partially experience, "not only alone, but in isolation".

In the last few months, an awareness of the dangers posed by the fragmentation of Italy's sociocultural fabric has led to growing belief in the idea that if the crisis is at the heart of the matter, then we should concentrate on that. Many people have followed this course: in the fields of psychology and psychotherapy, whether from the Lacanian or Jungian school; the world of religion, with strong reaffirmation in the supremacy of spirituality; and among those who find guidance in the ancient Jewish and Talmudic tradition ("If I am not for myself, who will be for me?" from Pirkei Avot, Ethics of the Fathers). All this has even been accompanied by a renewed exploration of ancient tools for self-discovery, like spiritual exercises from the Greek and Ignatian traditions. These efforts are all aimed to force individuals to return to their inner self, to suspend their participation in the great opinion game, to find a path to overcome hardships and invigorate thought through silence. While these attempts and stimuli are very significant, they do not seem to provide a way to effectuate key interpretations of the overall problem and result in some valuable action. In fact, there is a risk of being swallowed up by that very numbing isolation we want to overcome.

5. This is why it seems useful to make a more rough-and-ready observation alongside the psychological and anthropological approach that has helped us analyze Italian society for some time.

The severe crisis battering us in recent years is marking a return of a fundamental charactertistic of Italians (also a subjective and anthropological trait), namely the solid "rural backbone". This is still actually the almost-hidden point of reference behind our social evolution, even though we have

forgotten this basic framework in the inanity and triviality with which we have imported western modernity and comfort.

Indeed, the culture of continual adjustment can actually be traced back to this rural backbone: the procreative side to individual and collective behavior; the application of wisdom and judgement instead of being fixated on performance, with its improbable measurements and evaluations; the continual reinvention of the traditions within which we operate almost subconsciously; the importance of roots and inner vitality; the relationship with the territory, not as a base for isolation but as a "hub" for community life; the possibility and ability to view the horizon both as an opening and also as a realistic limit; the liberation from hierarchical culture, in the knowledge that hierarchies have nothing to do with the work of the farmer; the humility to toil the land we've been given, even if it is sandy or full of stones. So, perhaps the rural model is the most coherent with our current, undeniable struggles to live, adapt to the crisis and try to put the harsh season behind us. Even though this phrase's inherent territorial connotations do not make it the best metaphor, perhaps it is less gloomy and more open to the future than the currently fashionable options doing the rounds today (being on the edge of the precipice, the deck of the Titanic, staring into the brink of a volcano, etc.).

6. Moreover, the reference to the rural backbone is not only an exercise in metaphor, but expresses the prevalent hallmark of today's definition of society: where the real economy and long term thinking reign supreme, in constantly increasing mutual integration.

In the current situation, where the financial economy triumphs (with all its virtual, immaterial and speculative intricacies, simplified into minute-by-minute results and algorithms) it is hard to put renewed emphasis on the real economy, just as it is difficult to methodically plan for the long term. Notwithstanding that, if we want to think of the future and we still want to have the desire to grow, then it is only right to remember that historically, this desire became possible through those continual structural processes that transformed our society in the last sixty years. Today, we still need these processes to overcome this negative juncture and, more importantly, to conquer the fatalism with which many people accept the decline itself and also the obsession about the decline.

Thanks to our position as observers and narrators, we have always had the insight that Italy's development in the last fifty years was anything but a more or less unexpected and undeserved parenthesis in an eternal marginalization. It was the result of processes made possible by the blossoming of individu-

ality, the entrepreneurial spirit of small-and medium-sized enterprises, the vitality of different situations on the ground, various levels of social cohesion, the strength of families also economically and financially, the widespread ownership of real estate and personal property, a banking system strongly rooted in the local territory, and the responsible coverage of social needs (both by the public and private sectors). This assortment of individual and collective bodies and behaviors helped underpin, develop and encourage our progressive capacity for growth.

This fusion between the real economy and planning for the long term cannot vanish into thin air just because of a crisis. Yes, the emergency is certainly very deeprooted but it cannot radically change the evolutionary path we have been taking for decades. We have found ways to overcome the various crises emerging in the last ten years (all caused by others, given that they were financial "bubbles", from the new economy bubble in 2000 to that of the international banks in 2008). And we can overcome the current crisis, which also strongly smacks of another bubble, if we adopt the twin-track approach of defending our international interests with a capacity to bring our vitality into play, if we respect and exploit the roots of that vitality and if we know how to identify further ways to channel it.

In fact, cultivating a more long-term approach does not mean sinking into apathy while waiting for things to sort themselves out over time. Rather, it means exploiting the connection between our growth and the roots of our tradition, ensuring that link is constantly adjusted and not just simply repeated. We must not turn tradition into an inert symbol but something in continual evolution, driven by the subconscious conviction (from the farming culture) that "we are supported by the root".

7. But where do the roots of our long-term strategy take us? An analysis of recent events supports the theory that these roots exercise an energetic propulsion towards a marked socioeconomic diversity. Vitality is always expressed in terms of variety, and the long term is progressively associated with processes of articulation, understood as segmentation. As such, there has not been a unified reaction (of fear/and challenge) to the crisis in these last few months, but a complex and diverse response.

The trend for a widening social gap and increasing lack of uniformity throughout society is being confirmed, and this accentuates the propensity for inequalities in competiveness both within and beyond national borders, and probably also impinges on the austerity measures being considered. Though it should be noted that the social gap, the lack of uniformity and inequalities

are, nonetheless, "related to processes", they are never linked to social groups and classes. To put it in a more traditional way, the class struggle is not making a comeback, neither among people in temporary employment, who do not feel they are proletariats, nor for entrepreneurs working in the international arena, who cannot claim to be the new middle classes.

This social trend is being put into practice by processes consolidating individual behaviors, not social conflicts. So, in the current situation:

– there are players, who in the past we tried to define as a social group (the "active minorities"), who remain faithful to the entrepreneurial challenge today, using a liberal dose of empiricism and without worrying about collective identity. This challenge brings more difficulties but comes with an awareness that the only future for these businesses lies in the continual search for a niche in the changing geopolitical landscape. Perhaps they do not provide the driving impulse for the rest of society, but they preserve their ability to instigate growth, also through a diversified presence in every international sector;
– a second group encompasses those who have deliberately chosen to pursue a better quality of life. Again, this bears the imprint of processes that have generated the impression of an almost class-based evolution ("the Italians who have failed to create a true middle class have discovered they are village-dwellers"). However, this group does not actually behave like an identifiable class, but rather constitutes an enormous insertion of individuals into processes (of offshoot settlements, the creation of locally-based economies, urban reorganization etc.) that can be described as the distinguishing features of a large number of medium-sized cities and small municipalities, including significant swathes of Southern Italy;
– a third group can be identified as those who belong to the old, continuing process that is perhaps the most important in recent decades: the "mass expansion of the middle classes". Everyone now sees this has not created the classic kind of middle class (almost a class that spans the classes), but has worked purely as a mechanism for upward mobility. When this no longer offered a way to climb the social ladder, many people were frightened by the prospect that the mechanism could be reversed, creating downward mobility. This resulted in scattered adjustment or fearful defense, not a push for collective identity. Rather than adopting a conflictual approach these people are driven by the inert hope of staying in the middle strata of society;
– the final group is the part of society that has been weakened by the crisis, returning to a marginal position where it was before the explosion in the

middle classes, and now made insecure by competitive mechanisms considered extraneous and troubling. This group is grudgingly isolating itself; it passively accepts the increasingly vertical nature of decision making, though with suspicion; it is dependent on the media's reporting of the processes underway, passively subjected to its terminology; and it is developing an inclination to trigger potential public conflict.

So, seeds of tension and conflict could be nurtured in the near future, both because of the general trend of increasing inequality and, especially due to processes that create alienation, whether real or imagined. We must pay careful attention to these seeds.

Of course Italians have always been used to dealing with inequalities and imbalances: from the backwardness of the South to subsequent negative pressure in the North, from outbreaks of unrest led by the elite of Italy's working class to the highly charged student protests. But today, disaffection and dissent cut across the board, generated by the malaise in today's society, which combines "ecological" intolerance and objections; this gives rise to the desire for an outward public expression of the dynamics driving individual behaviors: it is the result of the loneliness endemic in a society where each element develops alone, without any connection to the others; at the worst it is the expression of the collective anthropological discomfort of having trouble living such a hard life. Paradoxically, there is a risk that social tensions will not emerge as diverging interests and groups, but more as the conclusion and the vent for people who live "not only alone, but in isolation". They are "alone" because they are held prisoner by purely egotistical and mainly emotional points of reference, "but in isolation" because they have no opportunity for self reflection, to gain insight, to relate to anything long-term, whether for society or in more existential terms.

8. The way to defuse the impending social strife does not lie in "healing the loneliness" of the various subjects. Instead, it lies in enriching social bonds. The individual and its evolution are not enough to explain social life and conflicts because society is made up of relations between people. This is even more so when the long term leads to the diversification of individuals and their ways of behaving.

This explains the introduction of a third element in today's social reality, alongside integration of the long term and increasing articulation, namely the development of relations, meaning we are emerging from our inner world to live with others and compare notes. This pairing of "more articulation, more relations" will enable Italian society to take a breather, less fixated with daily

anxieties and more coherent with long-term trends. What's more, it is encouraging to observe the role this search for new kinds of bonds plays in several important evolutionary processes:

– in the explosion of many social networks: naturally these force youngsters into purely computer-generated excursions that are also pretty meaningless and purely two-directional, but nevertheless they are an articulated, active form of horizontal relationship;
– in the spread of spiritual unions, where religion is not practiced privately but becomes community-based;
– in the unexpected rise in forms of collective entertainment, often occasional and sometimes more regular, for example activities like cruises, the social scene or *movida*, festivals and country fairs (with thousands to choose from every weekend);
– in the equally unexpected growth in unions able to compensate for shortfalls in public welfare (crèches, school canteens, mutual societies, etc.);
– in community participation (either by neighborhood in urban areas or by agricultural zone) supervising public services and defending unique resources in the local territory;
– in the growing weight of high quality collective life experiences (from renovated villages to medium-sized medieval cities of long-standing prestige);
– and especially in the constant staying power of all those civil society groups and associations with their related interests, who also rise above and beyond disparaging and condescending attitudes and carry on regardless, ignoring those calling for their abolition.

Of course, there is a shadow, a dark side to each of these relational forms: the banalizing fragmentation hidden in the social networks or the local favoritisms underyling the community experience. That said articulation-relations remains the best way to summarize Italy's evolution in this period.

9. At this point, one can correctly propound the theory that these elements of "the long term, articulation and relations" should be accompanied by the tough collective task of defending and exploiting political representation.

A system rooted purely in daily life, embodied by articulation and relations (that are often conflictual) always expresses greater diversification of interests. So there is a need for continual mediation, exploration of potential convergences, real mechanisms of participation, combating tensions in social cohesion and a desire for sharing strategies. Put simply, the

system is expressing the necessity for representational fora and mechanisms where all sides – whatever their size and importance - can contribute to decision-making processes on various levels.

Only representation can fill the vacuum in the intermediate strata of society created by the polarization between the market (and the subjectivism that it produces, also in an ethical sense) and the increasingly vertical nature of the financial world (and its immense but untransparent dimensions). And there is a need for social as well as political representation: in Italy today the former, which comprises concrete and substantial long term interests, has a considerable, some would say invasive presence. While the latter (political representation) is obviously going through a crisis, destroyed by electoral laws and procedures that have penalized participation, favoring the verticalization and personalization of power.

Closed in on themselves, the political institutions have left the job of defending acquired rights (and sometimes also privileges) to the representational bodies instead of making their own contribution to the policies driving the system.

This has led to an obvious diminution in their role, and often even their prestige. It should nevertheless be stressed that without a functioning representation, either social and/or political, society would be devoid of dialectic vitality and social dynamism, as well as lacking an invaluable intermediate sociopolitical fabric. This is a dangerous prospect at a time when we are seeing the emergence of not easily decipherable tensions and conflicts.

10. If we look back at our reflections so far, we can go as far as to say that Cicero's earlier quoted painful mixture of tiredness and shame (*partim dolore, partim verecundia*) we have been feeling for some time can be suitably compensated and proudly superseded by the observation that the slow pace of our development follows a solid course: the long term, internal articulation, relations and representation.

But the oft-quoted real world means we cannot forget (especially after the experience of recent months) that the system has problems with governance, given the huge polictical deficit that has accompanied, or perhaps even caused our inability to dominate the international processes and decisions involving our country.

It was predictable that the verticalization and personalization of power cultivated in the last twenty years would have, over time, damaged the possibility of governing Italy. And without political government of the system and its dynamics, we have also lost control of governance. This has

even created a vacuum, making many people think it is fatal to move towards a logic of polarized decision-making: where on one end rules the supremacy of the market (freedom for operators and liberalization of the rules) and on the other is the supremacy of the lofty organisms of financial power.

The current message seems to be "everyone for themselves and Frankfurt for everyone", almost as though a complex society like Italy's (but also other European countries) can live and grow relegating millions of people to become a (egotistical) multitude in the hands of a turbulent and unregulated market. And that it can continue by entrusting the minimal guarantee of order into the hands of the leaders (and/or circuits) of the rarified and not always transparent financial world. This is not the best of all possible scenarios because:

– left to the mercy of an-almost ideological market supremacy, the defects and fears of the masses are accentuated, fortifying the contraction of the individual, the growing meaningless and lack of sense, the complex anthropological unease and the diminution of all hope for the future;
– the verticalization of finance leads to the affirmation of powers that are further fed by specific reasoning, behaviors and even specific terminology, often passively accepted by everyone (even those who express indignation, demanding a "Holy Default" instead of considering settling the debt as a "Supreme Necessity").

The ancient Rabbis used to say: "If you speak Greek to a Greek, you've already admitted he's right". Today the political dialectic seems imprisoned by the supremacy of the higher echelons of financial regulation, also in linguistic terms. But perhaps we must understand the content of that language and that supremacy and observe that they express a dimension of control, not evolution and growth.

It is deceptive to think that the financial powers plan for growth. Following their instructions we can pass many stability pacts and austerity budgets, but cannot even try to devise a project, a plan for a law to stimulate development. Because growth is achieved with energy, mobilization, collective convergence of interests and thus only possible if political government is able to deal with reality: a reality to be understood and continually steered. This is why the re-proposition of the path mapped earlier in this document can be valuable, even with all its limitations. This path can be summarized as focusing on the value of the real economy, the long term, socioeconomic articulation, relations and representation. This could appear to be a manifesto of proud conservatism, but it has a subtle advantage: it investigates the theory that, if it is right that reasonable men put order into reality when necessary,