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Social  
picture  
and  
trends

 CENSIS

41<sup>st</sup>

ITALY

TODAY

FRANCOANGELI

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## I. GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS





1. This report should be the product of a long-term vision, and professional transparency requires that we state the interpretive guidelines we have followed in the past few years in arriving at our analysis.

In 2003 we announced there was no reason to resign ourselves to the idea of decline and impoverishment. The next year we noted that Italy was heading towards a mass patrimonialization – a phenomenon involving both personal and, to a much greater extent, actual property. In 2005, we verified that, fears notwithstanding, the country was showing new signs of vitality and recovery. Finally, last year’s summary reported rapid development, almost a silent boom, essentially driven by an industrial globalization-oriented minority, and a positive vision bucking the prevalent pessimismistic trend.

2. Now, at the end of 2007, we need to ask ourselves if this long-term sequence is continuing, or if instead the system is failing to transform the determination to develop, carried on every day by an industrial minority, into a common stance. In other words, is the silent boom still continuing? The answer is yes, due to the consolidation of these factors:

- the strategic orientation towards covering the highest market segments with an adequate supply combining product quality, image promotion, and high prices;
- the spontaneous choice of a complex “niche strategy,” rewarding product differentiation, the work-on-order approach, and the ability of small and medium-sized Italian companies in the acquisition and fidelization of customers;
- Italy’s territory-based development. In fact, the re-localization of much high-brand production has relaunched the main economic areas of the country: the North-East and the Adriatic coast, but also many districts of the North-West.

Moreover, the big players, capable of staying loyal to their relatively small size but developing their aggressiveness on international markets (especially East European ones), have entered a new period of assertiveness. This applies both to large companies with an industrial and financial tradition and to utility (especially energy) companies – the latter’s investments being much greater than in the past and than those in recent years all over Europe.

These combined factors make for a very positive assessment of Italy’s real economy. Manufacturing exports are growing, as are corporate turnovers and financial health. On the part of Italian entrepreneurs there is a growing desire to succeed both on individual and collective scale; the GNP is on the rise and should receive a further boost in the closing months of the year as a consequence of the combination of the above-mentioned factors. Finally, the entrepreneurs’ sense of superiority over financiers and politicians alike – which has always been typical of Italy’s real economy – is growing.

**3.** Yet it would be inaccurate to forget, by virtue of that pride, that financial factors could well be the black cloud in the otherwise clear sky of real economy. We should remember that:

- debt weighs heavily not only on national accounts, but also on the citizens’ psychological perception of their freedom: the awareness that they are paying interest for several dozen billions of euros every year makes them less enterprising;
- the chance discovery of a “surplus” in the Treasury funds and its erratic use for political gains instead of for reducing national debt—as it would be fairer—weakens and renders ambiguous any sense of responsibility toward a common financial good;
- financial troubles throughout the world in these past few months could create problems for companies trying to obtain credit, and for families attempting to pay back loans – the latter being more of a socially appreciable phenomenon, considering how many households have opted to take out loans or mortgages in the past five years.

Whether direct or indirect, these are relevant influences, all the more so because they attract public opinion and media communication (and dramatization) much more than the ordinary, almost “incommunicable” events of real economy. Nevertheless, the claim that recent worries – at least short-term ones – have decreased and partially vanished should not be taken as a downplaying of financial matters. What remains is the more frightening impoverishment of families paying interest on debt, which is due to a number of complex reasons whose analytical study transcends the scope of this report.

4. While short-term dynamics seem reassuring, the larger concern is to understand why the current “good recovery” is not turning into long-term development, or why the success of the industrial minority cannot spread throughout the whole of Italian society. We witness an energetic evolution for the few, but not the growth of an entire nation such as we have experienced several times in the past 60 years.

Facile explanations should be avoided – for instance explaining the divarication between an industrial minority, strong but incapable of leadership, and an indolent if not stagnant majority, with the former’s selfishness and weakness or the latter’s parasitism or denial of the very development being pursued. The attitudes of those two mega-components of society are indeed important; but in order to understand why the intense dynamics of the industrial minority seems unable to spread new collective energies throughout the whole system, we need to look elsewhere.

- a) This holds true from a geographical viewpoint, since even the most remote territorial microcosms in northern and central regions have absorbed the positive thrust of the developing minority, whereas virtually the whole South seems to be excluded from the positive trends of Italy’s real economy both on a national and an international scale. Thus the country’s economy is still marked by the old gap between the North and the South.
- b) This holds true from a sociological viewpoint, since some groups and segments of society (especially professionals and young people) have taken up new challenges, while most of the groups that are not exposed to competition remain unaware of those challenges.
- c) Differences are even more pronounced in wages. No wage increases have occurred even there where they would be justified. According to official statistics, salary increases were stronger in the public administration, but that is not a vital minority. The reality is probably different, considering the many kinds of payment industry can use. But no doubt wage control is entering industry, even in the case of managers, and this leads one to suspect that competitiveness on the markets might also be obtained by cutting costs. Companies have a twofold strategy – high prices on the outside, low cost on the inside.
- d) Lacking a wage increase policy, the minority development has not been able to raise consumption on a mass scale as was hoped and expected. In the first half of 2007, consumption rose by 2%, an unusual rate in recent years. However, that phenomenon is not due to an expansion of the minority’s energies, rather to a complex restructuring of Italian families’ consumption habits.

After the euro was adopted and currency devaluation had to be abandoned as a way to gain competitiveness, Italian companies had to reset costs (squeezing them) and strategies (devising new ones). With the new currency, households getting by on 1,000-1,500 euros a month faced dramatic cuts, hardship and a sense of vulnerability. But after a brief period of complaint, they strove to create a strategy of resistance, and a threefold spending plan followed: relying on low cost for ordinary consumption; concentrating the remainder on the acquisition of durable goods, perhaps adjusting consumer credit; devoting the rest, if any, to satisfying their gastronomic, touristic or even cultural whims (an increase in cultural consumption being prevalent). A mass cunning, a deliberate averageness... We can even think of a *petite raison* – perhaps of a low way of life – underpinning Italians’ smart spending options. It must be noted that a lack of confidence holds sway, along with pessimism over debt and its risks. Debt is generally paid off with no particular difficulty or suffering, and it is much lower than in other developed countries, but it is hard to recognize that in a culture that has remained static for too long.

5. A society reducing itself to a posture of resistance to its own vulnerability is little prone to care about the luck of an industrial minority, however successful on the international market, and more inclined to attribute its own predicaments to other, larger responsibilities. It tends to believe that a general, shared incapacity for participatory development is to blame for low income, low consumption, lack of confidence in the future. The industrial minority keeps to itself, the government distributes “small treasures” less for the building of the future than in compensation for the past. The majority remains vulnerable, left to its own devices, resigned more than nasty, its underlying apathy today being perhaps the most clearly defined feature of our society.

Development cannot percolate through society, both because it does not turn into a social process, and because society seems to settle into a widespread apathy – an anthropology without a past or a future. This reality is ambiguous, a fuzzy sociological and political profile, flat and de-totalized, that does not lend itself to interpretation. A reality:

- becoming a *mass pulp*, a blend of with drives, emotions, experiences, acutely indifferent to future goals and objectives;
- dangerously sinking into an *experience of the worst*, created and supported by a kind of impersonal, anonymous intellect – so much so that it becomes impossible to detect responsibilities;
- inverting, deliberately or not, processes which were symbolic of our being development-oriented, thus switching off any “vital” trends, as if, in a

society unable to cope with tensions and differences, those tendencies were nothing but archaic remnants.

The last three statements might look like provocations, but they contain a truth we should analyse, for glossing over them would be a sign of cowardice, a way of cynically sliding back into one of today's many rhetorics.

6. We can replace *mass pulp* with a less creative word – *mush*, an ineffectual set of “individual elements and personal bits” kept together by some superficial social dimension, in a context in which institutions play no cohesive role.

It is well known that the increasing fragmentation of all forms of cohesion and collective affiliation has heightened molecularity. In the past, such molecularity has been able to drive economic and entrepreneurial development. We at CENSIS have praised that molecularity, but we have noticed – how could we not? – that it has been shredding Italian society to pieces, “confetti” held together (or rather, side by side) by the force of habit, by contented bourgeoisification, by fear of regression, perhaps made insensitive by an increasingly generalized plebeian vulgarity.

The essential hallmark of the unidentifiable “human parts” is their dispersion into collective space and time. In space – for the total victory of an exasperating self-concern with no concern for relationship with others. In time – for an irrefutably declining attention span, whatever the topic, the problem, the phenomenon at hand (the writer Carlo Emilio Gadda once said that the longest attention span for Italian radio listeners was 12 minutes: what would he think of the current two-minute maximum?) No social fabric can be woven with such shreds. When it comes to individuals, we find only aimless aspirations; when it comes to society, weak connections, dull forms of aggregation, inanimate shadows of past cohesive processes.

7. Given this situation, it comes as no surprise that Italian opinion is beset by a feeling of deterioration, with the mass-media infusing and sustaining this sensation.

Wherever one looks, the average Italian thinks, we experience and observe aggravation: in politics, in domestic abuse, in urban petty crime and in organized crime, in drug and alcohol addiction, in the poor integration of immigrants, in a dysfunctional bureaucracy and waste disposal, in the rounds of vetoes hindering the development of infrastructures, in the low quality of TV programs... And the usual conclusion is that we are living a discouraging “experience of the worst.” In every realm, we are spared nothing.

Regressive factors, even if sometimes unnoticed, conquer the collective anthropology:

- a psychological poverty is spreading, with self-dispersion weakening any individual approach to social phenomena or interpersonal relationships;
- fragmenting drives are defeating unifying passions and especially rational attitudes, as a close look to some recent, uninspiring events will demonstrate;
- if instinctual drives have the upper hand, what seems to be overwhelming is a crave to appear in public, that makes even the craziest form of public presence the only desirable existence;
- this compulsion to appear leads to an excess of mediatic dramatization of experiences, of a restless, theatrical insistence and repetition—an anxiety-inducing and masochistic mechanism, causing in the end a huge waste of energy;
- the incessant loudness of the mass-media, and the underlying common strategy of mirroring the audience’s emotions and dramatizations, produce monotonous messages and languages, narrowing the diversity of codes. The world becomes nothing but its representation. Perhaps to forget tedium and sluggishness, we adjust ourselves to a virtual but noisy nirvana;
- things being as they are, new “ailments of the soul” – as some would call them – are likely to emerge. And individual, but especially social and political ambition, is marginalized: the highest ambitions are reduced to the mere hope of not disappearing.

**8.** We all are aware of single episodes of this inclination toward the worst, but we fail to grasp the overall meaning. We are prisoners of the surprise caused by those episodes and we fail to understand how they work, or how we can confront or combat such situations.

We can suppose that our inclination toward the worst finds its reason in a surrender to the logic of the “human bits,” giving up all points of reference, psychological convergences, collective symbols. With Melanie Klein, we can think of an ongoing “reversal of the symbolization process,” or more precisely, a process of “desublimation.” A society once built upon great symbolic references must recognize their corrosion and desublimation, their loss of meaning. The homeland becomes collective interest, rather than national identity; religion becomes the religiousness of given individuals or groups; freedom becomes an always defective self-ownership; the people becomes a mass multitude; family becomes a container of multiple morali-

ties; reason becomes *petite raison*; work is a secondary option when compared to the easy ways of making money; ethics becomes a list of indicators of *social responsibility*; passion crumbles into drives; the value of the word gets ground up into excited sound bites, devoid of any content or message.

No-one can deny that the reversal of the symbolization process is the outcome of historical and cultural processes that have also freed individuals from old behavioral cages and axiological inferiorities. Those processes democratized collective life, cutting down the powers that often used to be the wardens—not too disinterested—of great symbols. At the same time, no-one can deny that such reversal is engendering a socio-cultural mechanism which increasingly corrodes symbols and prevents the emergence of common ideas, social convergences, and political projects. The ritual calling of street demonstrations by outdated social bodies, or the new, hastily assembled political parties are most unlikely to give rise to new values. In the mush made up of fragments, appealing to identities can only bring on their progressive numbing.

9. We cannot turn a blind eye on the hidden but pervasive connection among the three processes just analysed (the social “mush” inclined to the worst, desublimating every collective value). A dangerous liaison which could inhibit the vitality that has been part and parcel of the country’s history.

The finish line of the “worst” would be the loss of that vitality. Therefore, we can and must pluck up our courage and look at reality without the help of handy repressions and omissions. The petty bourgeois comfort of the last decades has created a *monstrum alchemicum* making us helpless as if confronted by a general entropy.

It is no accident that, while those inclined to merely moral considerations see this “monster” as the fruit of immoral or, better, amoral forces, which have effortlessly entered into individual and collective dynamics, others fatalistically accept the idea that “everything is vain” and that one can only save one’s soul and life. Others tend to illuministic considerations, hoping and waiting for the wrath of history – which is not falling on us, however, but is getting stuck in the mire and dissipates into trivial emotions. Others yet express messianic and fundamentalist considerations – God interrupting history with radical events – which are however immediately repressed by those who do not believe in God’s power and think we will be responsible of our own history for a long time to come.

However, a complex society like ours cannot afford to get stuck in any kind of passive acceptance of the entropy that is wearing us out. We need to



envision new offerings of collective culture based on loyalty to the theory and practice of Italy's history, past and recent. We need to rediscover reactive forces under the surface of our society and give them new vigor. In order to do so, we must resolutely:

- reject current cultural and political offerings. In the best of cases, they are connected to a quest for the balance of forces and counterforces. But while equilibrium is obviously desirable in the social dialectic, this quest is no longer a meaningful aim, because the forces and counterforces themselves have become insubstantial. In the worst cases, the hollow logic of opposing fronts makes these offerings false. The crisis of ideology is marked by the crisis of this logic, and opposing fronts are doomed to become nothing more than mirror images of powermongers;
- understand we cannot think “in pendulum motion,” as many do. They assume that, after this desublimating and desymbolizing phase, a new one will begin, reasserting basic values and providing charismatic mobilizations. Traveling back in time, as some naively hope, is impossible. But fundamentalist and charismatic tendencies are widespread today, created by looking to different social (and religious) systems and responding to uncertainty with a “need for a strong man with strong ideas.” It is understandable that someone could think that fragmentation will give way to the desire for unity, but we seem well protected against fundamentalism and charismatic leaderships.

**10.** All of these critical approaches have on common defect – thinking in terms of systems: the political balances of forces, the weight of opposing fronts, the value of foundations and of fundamentalism, temptations of charismatic leadership as attraction of multiplicity.

It is not a proud assertion of business culture that urges us to recall that in any modern society – and especially in Italy – great geniuses and great systems have been replaced by an individual sense of adventure and risk assumption on one side, and by relational exchanges on the other.

Non need to recall – not here, anyway – the features of Italian society that match this evolution: large-scale subjectivities, molecular enterprises, growing Web communication, tourist flows within and outside the national borders. Suffice it to say, as an almost symbolic confirmation, that in recent times what has made the most famous members of our vital minority great – be they car manufacturers or fashion designers, leaders in the leather industry or in high finance – has been their sense of adventure and their broad range of connections. Suffice it to say, too, at a lower level, some in the show

business have tried to enter into politics combining personal adventure and Web communication, but did not prove satisfactory manufacturers (of semantic style, at least).

If this interpretation holds, an innovative cultural offering should support individual adventure and promote an increase in relational exchanges. Such offering can only come from new active minorities:

- scientific researchers and technical innovators, orienting themselves towards humanity's adventure and biological potentials;
- those who, following today's ambitious industrial minority, experience a sense of personal adventure in international relations (young people studying or working abroad, professionals ready to explore new markets, of all sorts of tourism workers, etc.);
- those who opted to live in local communities with high living standards;
- those capable of forming relationships with immigrants as a means of increasing integration and social cohesion;
- those who persist in believing their religious experience can respect both personhood and the complexity of development on various levels;
- those who have chosen to belong to collective structures (groups, movements, associations, unions) as a way of searching for meaning and social cohesion.

This seems, and probably is, a rather minimalist suggestion, far from the loftiness and the ambition typical of recent decades. We should remember, however, that we now need to trigger a slow but deep evolution. Only minorities can find a solid starting point, only minorities can launch social processes without being tempted to gain short-term advantages and to become a majority that establishes and rules the system.

**11.** Moreover, when it comes to who has what to offer, the minorities listed above are much more incisive than what is offered by the current political discourse, where reciprocal blame seems not to require describing alternatives, and proposals are uninspiring and ineffectual in terms of real public opinion. Who believes in a simple and literal revival of aid for the South, in strengthening EU's powers and functions, in fighting for a more or less revolutionary social justice, etc.? We have to wait for those who hold out against the worst to start off on a new path towards reconstruction, where real people and relational exchanges can have strategic weight. Italy needs more minorities who can reverse the current regression.

The most vital and dynamic industrial minority cannot draw everybody in, since for the moment it is focused on conquering rich and far-off markets,

with products so high-priced that they cannot hope to gain imitators in the poorer Italian market. And the economic recovery, though very real, might be distorted unless it triggers widespread attitudes of adventure and relational exchange, and a new confidence in the future, in a next stage in development. Only the minorities we listed can release the energy needed to find a way out of the current stalemate.

**12.** That energy, however, will need a “collective collector” and newly formed alliances. One could expect a solution from political action, that traditional driver of social mobilization. But the present political conditions do not offer much reason to hope, as new and old alignments lack edge and unity, the verticalization of leadership has proven ineffectual, and the ruling class, shaken by the current surge of “anti-politics”, shows an exorbitant compulsion to appear, especially in the media. The tasks of collecting energies and creating new socio-political alliances require something different.

Also because politics—more objectively speaking—is made up of “broad opinion” (crowded squares and TV studios are the staging posts). But today a new offering can only emerge from a “narrow awareness”, from a culture capable of shaking the majority from its apathy that levels everything to the worst, and of building new semiotic codes. These codes may even be quite partisan, for they are directed toward chosen targets rather than toward “broad opinion”.

What are space and time filled with? The reply to this question, that has been besetting all analysts of long-term processes in the history of our country, could still be that space and time are filled with potentialities, provided we just start thinking—not idly ruminating on present conditions, but envisaging new areas of individual and collective engagement, and coming to terms with the processes which create collective connectedness and historical development. A difficult challenge that the minorities quoted above will probably have to confront by themselves. A desirable challenge, though, thanks to which we can keep on growing and even enjoy our time. But a realistic challenge, too, for the issue here is not inventing something new, rather following in the footsteps of all modern developed countries, that view as modern all the processes that we consider regressive: ethnic mix, patrimonialization, decline in birth-rate, flattening of the middle class etc. Above all, a necessary challenge – necessary to ward off an inclination to the worst that dangerously borders on intellectual ignominy and on irreparable boredom.

## II. ITALIAN SOCIETY IN 2007