

THE NEW YORKER

A CRITIC AT LARGE

BOOTED

What really ails Italy?

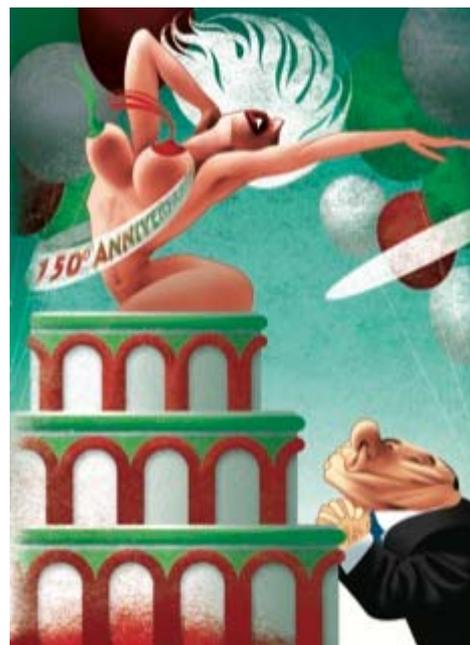
by Tim Parks

APRIL 11, 2011

Anniversaries are uplifting when you have something to celebrate. A couple on the edge of divorce do not rejoice that their wedding anniversary is around the corner. Something of the same uneasiness surrounded the hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary of the Italian state, on March 17th. As late as February, the government couldn't decide whether the day should be declared a national holiday. The Northern League, a major party in the ruling coalition, complained about the loss of working hours; many of the League's members have a separatist agenda and want to avoid a surge in national pride. The governor of South Tyrol, a German-speaking province ceded to Italy after the First World War, said that it was unreasonable to expect his people to celebrate their subjugation to an alien culture.

Nor does the rest of Italy see much reason to celebrate. The economy lags behind the French and German economies. Unemployment is at 8.6 per cent and youth unemployment at nearly thirty per cent. Wages are low, growth negligible. Meanwhile, Italy's Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi, is on trial for allegedly bribing a lawyer and has recently been charged with paying a minor for sex and then trying to obstruct police inquiries. Far from resigning, he has promised to use the trial to denounce a conspiracy against him by "Communist" magistrates and has introduced a bill to curb their powers. A constitutional crisis is brewing at a time when the government's energies are required elsewhere.

Deeper than this, there has long been a feeling in Italy that the project of national unity was flawed from the start, and will never work satisfactorily—that the country's government will always be stalled, and the south forever the unmanageable territory of organized crime. Three recent books express the mood in their titles: Manlio Graziano's ambitious "The Failure of Italian Nationhood" (Palgrave; \$80) seeks to get to the heart of the problem, examining crisis after crisis in the past century and a half in search of some recurrent behavior pattern that might explain Italy's troubles; "Resisting the Tide: Cultures of Opposition Under Berlusconi" (Continuum; \$130)



Italian voters used to be charmed by Berlusconi's libertine ways.

and “Italy Today: The Sick Man of Europe” (Routledge; \$47.95) are collective efforts. The first, edited by a group of Italian scholars from the University of Birmingham—Daniele Albertazzi, Clodagh Brook, Charlotte Ross, and Nina Rothenberg—documents the difficulties of opposing a Prime Minister who owns the three major private TV networks, exercises a profound influence on the three public networks, and controls a large part of the press, the publishing world, and the advertising industry. The second, edited by Andrea Mammone and Giuseppe Veltri, examines a range of troubling economic, political, and social issues. Where many accounts of recent Italian history have been prone to overheated rhetoric and cries of scandal, all three of these books are admirable for their sober, businesslike tone. Nevertheless, their findings are far from optimistic.

The idea of laying bare some persistent group dynamic that would explain the vagaries of Italian public life—Graziano’s aim—has haunted me throughout my thirty years in the country. I left England for Italy in the fall of 1981, having found myself a lovely Italian wife. We settled in Verona, where the Alps peter out in the north Italian plain, a small, elegant, conservative city, unquestioningly Catholic and immensely proud of its huge Roman arena and frescoed Renaissance piazzas. It seemed the right kind of place to underachieve in hedonistic peace.

The mood was bullish. Italy had accomplished an economic miracle in the nineteen-fifties and sixties, shifting from a rural to an urban and industrialized economy. Its G.D.P. was supposedly overtaking Great Britain’s. Verona in particular was a full-employment town, as confident and self-satisfied as you could imagine.

Even then, however, I recall being struck by how the interiors of homes and cafés and shops were so carefully cleaned and cared for, while the streets, as soon as one was away from the showcase city center, were often in a state of abject disrepair. The traffic was aggressive and choked, the pedestrian crossings deadly, the buses overcrowded, the train stations scruffy and underfunded. The bureaucracy was maddeningly complex (one stood in line for hours for residency papers only to hear that documents were required that you had not been told to bring); public-sector jobs seemed to be handed out mainly on a political basis (you’d hear bus drivers remark that the next job in the depot had to go to a Socialist rather than to a Communist or a Christian Democrat); public officials were often corrupt (I had to pay a considerable bribe to two tax officials who threatened to make my life unpleasant otherwise), and the lira was constantly being devalued, keeping Italian industry competitive abroad by nullifying concessions on wages and pensions.

Graziano’s book sets out to show that this mixture of apparent economic success and behavioral backwardness had its roots in the distant past. His argument is complex, and takes us back to the late medieval era, when Italy was ahead of the rest of Europe. In the power vacuum that accompanied the decline of the Holy Roman Empire, a number of large and efficient city-states evolved, all having an unusually potent sense of a separate identity. Venice, Florence, Milan, Naples, and Rome were aware that Italy might eventually be considered a territorial unit, and did everything they could to avoid being swallowed up in it: they were, as Graziano comments, “too weak to absorb others, too strong to let themselves be absorbed.” This proud disunity is exactly what allowed foreign powers to overrun and carve up the peninsula in the

sixteenth century, a situation that, aside from the interlude of a Napoleonic invasion, remained largely unchanged until the mid-nineteenth century.

When unification came, it was led not by the major city-states of the past but by the half-French region of Piedmont, an area peripheral to Italian history and with a long record of rounding up and executing Italian nationalists. Nor had Piedmont planned to annex the whole peninsula. Exploiting wars between France and Austria to acquire the rich northern part of the country, the Piedmontese king was faced with a startling *fait accompli* when the revolutionary Giuseppe Garibaldi, initially leading an expedition of only a thousand men, quite unexpectedly conquered the whole of Sicily and southern Italy. Garibaldi then offered the territory as a gift to the now enlarged Piedmont, which, as much to avoid the spread of republicanism as for any other reason, sent its armies south to meet him. On March 17, 1861, Italy became a single state under the Piedmontese crown.

The new country's prospects were not encouraging. The vast majority of Italians had not sought unity and many had fought against it; those who supported it were divided between republicans and monarchists, and some were not so much nationalist as internationalist, working toward a united socialist Europe. An estimated 97.5 per cent of the population didn't speak the national language. (Most spoke one of scores of local dialects.) The Catholic Church, which before unification had governed territories in central Italy, remained implacably opposed to the new state and for decades instructed practicing Catholics not to vote in elections. Those in the north had little idea how to govern the economically backward south. In short, in Graziano's view, it was a complete fluke that the country came into being at all. The fact that it survived, he argues, had far more to do with the fraught power games among France, England, and Austria than with any real will of the Italians to exist as a nation.

This lack of internal agreement or identity, coupled with an awareness that the unity of the country was assured by foreign powers, had dire consequences, Graziano says. It's the reason that Italian politicians have always sought a fudged and fragile consensus that would maintain the internal and divided status quo, rather than clarify the truly national interest. Countries like Germany, France, and England periodically undertake painful socioeconomic reforms in order to adapt to changing international markets. Italy, unable to reform, has made a virtue of a low-wage, low-productivity economy, with little social mobility, a choice given respectability by the preaching of a complacently anti-capitalist Church.

How does Graziano's assessment of the founding moment in Italian history hold up? Positions for and against unification—that it was the inevitable destiny of the Italian people, or a disastrous mistake—are a staple of Italian conversation, and, however cogently Graziano writes, one sometimes feels that he is loading the dice. Still, his analysis does shed light on the social and political dysfunction I've witnessed in the past thirty years.

Two months after my arrival in Verona, members of the left-wing terror group the Red Brigades abducted U.S. General James Lee Dozier from an apartment not three miles from our rented rooms. During the forty-two days he was held captive, fur-clad Veronese ladies crossing the town's bridges in the freezing winter fog were obliged to submit their designer

handbags to inspection by carabinieri with machine guns. The Red Brigades had targeted Dozier because they took him to represent Italy's submission to America, the country that was preventing Italy's Communist Party, which regularly polled thirty per cent of the vote, from ever holding power. Graziano notes that the two competing postwar visions of Italy's future, Christian Democrat and Communist, were both subservient to foreign models and financed by foreign backers. If the American vision was dominant—as the Christian Democrats' decades-long rule attested—it was because of Italy's geographical position, the generosity of the Marshall Plan, and the image of material wealth that American films and television projected.

Graziano even suggests that Italian statesmen have deliberately played down Italian nationalism, insisting on the country's Catholic-inspired internationalism or “European credentials,” in order to sell the country's allegiance to the highest bidder. Foreign money could then be used to fund and facilitate agreements within Italy: new political players and contentious interest groups could be brought into the governing coalitions for a share of the spoils. This strategy of accommodation without unity of purpose is what Italians call *trasformismo*, an ethos that was still alive and well in 1983, when the Socialist leader Bettino Craxi was invited to become Prime Minister, despite the fact that his party was only a minor partner in the mainly Christian Democrat coalition. “Everyone bargains with everyone,” the finance minister in Craxi's government remarked. “All procedural activity is a bargain, and at each bargain either we come to a halt or something goes missing.”

This is true of every area of Italian life, sports included. In 1985, Verona won the so-called *scudetto*, the national soccer championship. It is the only year in the past four decades that the competition has been won by a small provincial team. It was also the year that the league decided to select referees by lot rather than designation. Needless to say, the following season, the league went back to the old system. As the holder of a stadium season ticket, I quickly became aware of how much was decided off the pitch. In some games, referees were clearly seeking to influence the result. But, for the Italian crowd, this actually made the matches more exciting: you were playing against the referee but still winning! Or you had the referee on your side but still couldn't score! Later, when I wrote about soccer in Italy and spent time with the players, they not only confirmed my impressions but expressed doubt that things could ever be otherwise. Big towns like Milan, Rome, and Turin had more influence than Verona, and Verona had more influence than many smaller places. No one was thinking of the sport as a whole, only of his place in the pecking order.

Meantime, Verona, with a rapidly rising immigrant population, became notorious for racist chants from the stands. “They will use this as an excuse for making us lose all our games,” fans complained. In those years, the police once questioned me for four hours because the head of a department in which I was teaching a course at the university had been accused of selling exam results. (I left the university in Verona and started teaching in Milan.) A friend working in an import agency explained that his boss gave monthly “money gifts” to all the officials in the customs office.

In the nineteen-nineties, Graziano points out, Italy's external point of reference shifted from America to the European Community. With the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Italian Communists

began to transform themselves into a social-democratic movement, and lost their Russian sponsors. America no longer needed to finance the Christian Democrats. Desperate for cash, the politicians milked businesses pursuing government contracts. At the same time, a newly united, confident Germany accelerated the process of European unity and preparations for a single currency. Italy suddenly needed to introduce austerity measures to meet the Community's monetary requirements. But how could this be done with parties that were, as Graziano observes, "incapable of playing the liberal role put upon them by the new free-trade era"?

The answer was Clean Hands, a vast police operation that exposed the so-called Tangentopoli, or "Bribesville," behind public-sector contracts and led to corruption charges against more than a third of the deputies in the Italian parliament. This insured that they would vote for anything the government proposed, however Draconian, since to bring the administration down would mean losing parliamentary immunity. The Clean Hands judges, Graziano concludes, "were to a certain extent the 'secular arm' charged with administering the European verdict that condemned this torpid political system." Again, change had effectively been imposed from outside, rather than arising from internal resolve.

Because *trasformismo* represents an accommodation rather than a creed, Graziano notes, support for a transformist regime will vanish the moment it can no longer satisfy the demands of its clients. He cites the millions of Italians who voted Fascist in 1924, having voted against Fascism only three years earlier. In the early nineteen-nineties, Clean Hands effectively destroyed the Christian Democrat and Socialist Parties, and in 1994 there was a huge electoral shift, this time to the newly formed party of the magnate Silvio Berlusconi.

Having made his first fortune as a property developer, Berlusconi came to public attention as the man who challenged the country's old-fashioned broadcasting restrictions and brought modern TV to Italy. He was the first private operator to broadcast nationally, even though it was illegal at the time to do so. He gave people brash game shows and imported soaps, sweeping away the fusty piety that had previously dominated the media. Many people loved him for it.

But Berlusconi was able to build his television empire only because of an alliance with the Socialist leader, Bettino Craxi. So when the Socialists melted away (Craxi later fled to Tunisia to avoid jail), Berlusconi went into politics, not just, as he always insisted, "to save the country from Communism" but also to protect his media holdings from his enemies. Here was a gambler drastically raising the stakes to stay ahead of the game. The move captured the nation's imagination, and soon enough the magnate was Prime Minister.

Was Berlusconi's election the beginning of another long-term, transformist regime? The historian James Newell thinks not. In his unusually optimistic book "The Politics of Italy" (Cambridge; \$31.99), he observes that since 1994 right-wing and left-wing coalitions have won alternate elections, the hallmark of normality in a democratic country. Indeed, his book has the polemical subtitle "Governance in a Normal Country," pointedly distinguishing it from such analyses as Geoff Andrews's "Not a Normal Country: Italy After Berlusconi" (2005). Meant as a textbook introduction for students of politics, Newell's work organizes a mass of valuable information on the structure of Italian institutions, while declining to give any sense of the distance

between the official version of how things work and the reality. The date he cites as a step toward normalization, 1994, marks the moment when I decided that all talk of normality was ingenuous. With great enthusiasm, the Italians had voted in a Prime Minister who milked his control of the media for all it was worth while simultaneously denying that he had any conflicts of interest. And the people agreed with him. In 1995, the electorate rejected a referendum that would have broken up Berlusconi's empire. More mysteriously, the left-of-center governments that interrupted Berlusconi's hold on power, in the late nineties and from 2006 to 2008, did nothing serious to correct this glaring anomaly.

Many of the essays in "Italy Today" describe situations that tend to support Graziano's gloomier analysis. One focusses on an aging political élite that "is indecisive and creates obstacles," and "hides itself cynically in nepotistic protection." Another argues that "Italian media owners have always pursued politics, not profit," so that newspapers recruit journalists on the basis of political affiliation rather than talent. It is common for the media to deny that objectivity is possible, a cynicism that was reinforced by the decision, in the nineteen-eighties, to allow the three major political parties to control one each of the three public TV channels.

We are arriving at the core of the problem. As a nation, Italians will strike temporary bargains among themselves, but they don't seek genuine conflict resolution. They seek to win, or at least not to lose, and so prefer to keep the conflict open, much as if they were involved in a soccer league, with matches to be won or lost each year by fair means or foul. The identity that counts for them is not national; it's one constructed around arguments with other sections of Italian society. As early as 1824, Giacomo Leopardi, in "Discourse on the Present State of the Customs of the Italians," concluded that society in Italy was above all "a vehicle of hatred and disunity." Vivacious by nature, but brought, through a series of historical accidents, to a state of skepticism about anything and everything, the Italians, as Leopardi saw it, did nothing but "deride and torment each other."

Leopardi would only be confirmed in his opinion if he were alive today. Radio and TV debates invariably degenerate into shouting matches. Opponents are presented not so much as wrong but as losers, or, better, sexually inadequate losers. Again, the mind-set is not new. In Vitaliano Brancati's wartime novel "Il Bell' Antonio," the title character loses his career in the Fascist Party when it gets out that he is sexually impotent. A political loser and a sexual loser are the same thing. People "talk about philosophy and liberty only because they can't get a hard-on" is the popular view. Mussolini was notorious for his winning ways with women, though, as a mistress of his lamented, he never wasted time taking his pants off.

All this explains why Berlusconi's libertine reputation isn't a political impediment, as it would be in the United States. On the contrary, in a culture where winning is all-important, his flaunted relationships with beautiful women and the general perception that he plays fast and loose with the law are factors in his favor. And from the very beginning Berlusconi insistently presented himself as a winner—a champion of the no-bullshit, let-me-have-my-fun common man. He is extravagantly generous and makes sure that he is seen to be so. After all, in a nation where each group is intent on securing its interests, who is most suitable to rule if not the richest and most lavish man around? Who can best get people to agree if not the man who controls the vast

majority of TV and advertising? The implications of Graziano's book are that as long as Berlusconi can satisfy the clients he has gathered around him he will remain in power. Meanwhile, Berlusconi has promised that he will live to be a hundred.

The contributors to "Resisting the Tide"—the title declares both the book's partisan position and its pessimism—want Berlusconi out but can't see it happening. The picture they paint is of stoic defiance in the face of overwhelming odds. An editor of the biggest national daily, the *Corriere della Sera*, resigned under pressure from the industrial interests behind the paper, who felt it unwise to be critical of the Prime Minister when they needed public financing. TV satirists and hosts have lost their shows because of opposition to Berlusconi. The contributors quote at length from writers and film directors who have tried to warn the country what is happening. Here is the novelist Vincenzo Consolo describing the Italy created by Berlusconi's popular television:

Ever more petit bourgeois, consumerist and fascistic, the tele-stupefied country has lost all awareness of culture and language. It has lost all memory of itself, its history, its identity. Italian has become a horrendous language, a babble invaded by media languages which expresses nothing but merchandise and consumption.

Certainly since the early nineteen-nineties, there has been a loss of aesthetic and moral discrimination in Italian life, an anything-goes feeling that culminates in the spectacle of a serving Prime Minister accused of contracting a minor for sex. But equally disquieting is the way the writers and critics quoted in "Resisting the Tide" seem to draw their identity from the scandal they denounce and their futile resistance to it. Taking despondent refuge on the moral high ground, they actually become a feature of the Berlusconi vision; they are the whiners who moan that the glorious winner is cheating. To every accusation, from journalists and judges alike, Berlusconi's reply is the same: I won the elections, the people want me, so all objections to me are undemocratic.

The problem of how to oppose Berlusconi without reinforcing his victorious image is evident at every level of political debate. For example, in October, 2009, the high court declared unconstitutional a new law that would have made certain institutional figures, including the Prime Minister, immune from trial during their period of office. Speaking on a TV talk show after the decision, Berlusconi criticized the Italian President for not having used his influence to persuade the judges to accept the bill. Rosy Bindi, a leader in the Democratic Party, immediately objected that such criticism was unacceptable and seditious. Berlusconi snapped at the middle-aged and plain Ms. Bindi, "I see you are still more beautiful than you are intelligent." Bindi replied, "I'm not one of those women you can buy." The following day, a member of the opposition referred to Berlusconi, who is famously short, as "taller than he is polite." Thanks to the way the media (mostly in the Prime Minister's control) handles events, these insulting jokes were what stuck in the public memory, not Berlusconi's contempt for the country's institutions. Similarly, the glamour of Berlusconi's young women attracts more attention than his alleged corruption of a judge. "The only literature Italians find compelling today," a journalist for the *Corriere della Sera* told me, "are the transcripts of the phone taps of Berlusconi's babes, with the girls complaining

how exhausted they are after a night with the Prime Minister and their middle-class *mammas* telling them to ask for more cash.”

Other young people do not find money so easy to come by. In 2003, with the so-called Biagi law, Berlusconi introduced new kinds of part-time and short-term contracts for those coming into the job market while preserving the security and the privileges of those already employed. The idea was to modernize the labor market and help business without upsetting the unions. As a result, though, not only are nearly a third of young people unemployed but a high proportion of those working have low-wage, six-month contracts. In short, with devaluation no longer possible, it is the young (and the families who have to keep them at home) who pay the price for the government’s inability to restructure the economy with a clear perception of the nation’s needs. Instead of the political articulation of alternatives, there is temporizing and, very occasionally, terror. In 2002, Marco Biagi, the economic adviser who drew up the original proposal, was shot dead by the Red Brigades. So much for normality.

Across the Mediterranean, just now, Italy’s Arab neighbors are in chaos, a situation that threatens a new wave of immigration, already considered by many to be at a critical level. Berlusconi has reluctantly agreed to intervention in Libya but says he is “grieving” for his friend Qaddafi. Meanwhile, the Northern League, which opposes the intervention, is pushing through legislation that will devolve fiscal powers to the regions, and so keep northern money where it is, rather than have it subsidize the poorer south. Although the legislation arouses little enthusiasm in the country, it is the price that Berlusconi has to pay to keep the League in his coalition and so retain a parliamentary majority for his magistrate-hobbling justice bill. A common but untranslatable Italian idiom, *un gioco al massacro* (literally, “a game to the massacre”), is telling; it refers to conflicts where both parties are destroyed because of their obstinate determination to win an argument.

Toward the end of February, the government finally decided that the March 17th anniversary would indeed be a national holiday, but an unpaid one, and hence, for some, a kind of punishment. In the Veneto, Garibaldi was burned in effigy, condemned for uniting the country against its will. Representatives of the Northern League ostentatiously absented themselves from all singing of the national anthem and refused to allow the flag to be waved in the regional assembly of Lombardy. Of the twenty-two students in my class in Milan on March 15th, only one said that she would be celebrating. (She was doing so, she explained, simply out of irritation at those who wouldn’t.) As I went for my morning cappuccino on the day of the anniversary, the only sign of festivity was a small tricolor attached to the wing mirror of a garbage truck. ♦

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