

Can Italy Be Too Italian?

Judith Harris (August 05, 2010)



In a recent article New York Times reporter Michael Kimmelman asked the bizarre question “Is Italy Too Italian?” suggesting that Italy is so tradition bound, insular and lacking in upward mobility that it risks to sink in a “gradual, grinding decline”. We actually find that “Magical Italy,” the “*storia, cultura ed arte*”, is being left to rot and ruin: the country is doing its best to shoot itself in the foot, fast, beginning with a sickening neglect of its greatest single and unique strength, its deep culture. Maybe the question we should ask ourselves is “Is Italy believing too much in magic, at the expense of common sense?”

A [New York Times headline](#) [2] asked a bizarre question the other day: “Is Italy Too Italian?” At first the question seemed absurd. I mean, can a dog be too canine, a goldfish too fishy? In his article, Times reporter Michael Kimmelman, taking the manufacturing industry as an example, suggested that Italy is so tradition bound, insular and lacking in upward mobility that the nation risks sinking into a “gradual, grinding decline.”

Would that we Italian lovers could disagree. On the contrary, Italy is doing its best to shoot itself in the foot, fast, beginning with a sickening neglect of its greatest single and unique strength, its deep culture, including but not only its archaeological sites, being less undermined than blown to pieces.



Beginning at the top, the government acknowledges and indeed boasts that Italian archaeology and historical sites—statues, fountains, temples, palazzi, historic gardens, bridges, Baroque cupolas—sell Italy; log onto the [Italian Tourism Official Website](#) [3], and you can hear Premier Silvio Berlusconi in person invoking, in the tone one uses while speaking to very young and not very bright children, “Magical Italy,” its “*storia, cultura ed arte.*” Lovely zoom shots show ancient towns, the Trevi Fountain, turquoise bays, and so on (without a single human being, car, boat or graffito, but never mind).

The point is that all this Magical Italy is being left to rot and ruin. Grand opera house budgets have been slashed. Library personnel who retire are not replaced, so that the number of librarians drops, and even rare books disappear from shelves. The latest depressing shock news: reporter Carlo Alberto Bucci of *La Repubblica* informs us that cultural maintenance funds have been cut back to the point that, as of August 1, archaeologists, architects and art historians “cannot utilize their own automobiles to travel to excavations and sites scattered throughout the territory” which they are supposedly controlling because travel reimbursements have been cancelled to cut costs and to avoid possible liability actions. In a way, this is good; as archaeologist Salvatore Settis reminds us, the average age of ministry functionaries is now 56 so perhaps it is best if the old dears give up driving.

However, as a result, the 6,000 archaeological sites in the area of Rome alone can no longer be checked by trained Culture Ministry supervisors. The sense of this is that no one with archaeological expertise will be tending the store.

In Rome, one way around the financial crunch—a result of the government’s slashing of the culture budget—is being promoted by Mayor Gianni Alemanno, who favors raising ticket prices for entry to museums, the Coliseum and all Roman archaeological sites, plus applying a tourism tax of perhaps E. 3 as of January 1, 2011.

One could feel pity for the struggling Italian culture administration, save for the fact that the current Minister, Sandro Bondi, seems singularly indifferent to what is going on in his bailiwick, given that he is also responsible for the beleaguered Berlusconi party organization.

Curiously, in certain areas money seems to be no object. At Pompeii, brand new and expensive-looking metal gates have been put into place to keep people out of the closed-off buildings and houses. These gates, and there are hundreds, are archaeology in their own way as examples of 1970s bad taste.

Finally, a worrying new ISTAT figure shows a 5% drop in productivity over 2007-09 in Italy. By comparison, France and Germany have boosted productivity (worker output in units) by 5-10% during the same period. An old Italian hand wrote me yesterday: “Italy used to be funny, but now it's a bad joke.” I can't go that far, but it is painful to watch a nation, in dire need of the structural transformation that will bring it into the post-industrial world and the knowledge economy, sabotage its prime selling points—not only the vast cultural heritage, but also the universities, arts academies, schools, and landscapes as well. Oliviero Toscani, with Prof. Settis as advisor, is assembling a gallery of Italian horrors, which documents in photographs the destruction of the landscape. (For details of how to contribute your own photos, go to: <http://www.nuovopaesaggioitaliano.it/> [4])

So maybe Kimmelman’s question could be rewritten as: “Is Italy believing too much in magic, at the expense of common sense?” Beloved Italy, it is time to stop shooting yourself in the foot, not to mention shooting off the mouth about “magic.” Time to come back down to earth, and to reality. Time to protect your unique, marvelous heritage, rather than leave it to rack and ruin, plunderers and pollution.

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