

Proverbial Questions, American Elections

Maria Laurino (October 20, 2008)



Americans might find inspiration in a Neapolitan proverb, and Italians might find inspiration in America.



There's an old Neapolitan proverb: "Three are the powerful: the pope, the king, and the man who has nothing."

To Italian novelist Alberto Moravia, the proverb revealed the essence of the existentialist struggle: "Being poor is a form of power," Moravia explained. "In fact, what is called existentialism was the idea that man exists and that existence is an indestructible strength."

I wanted to believe Moravia's interpretation when I read it years ago, but it always seemed a bit too romantic for me. I'm not sure if my southern Italian relatives felt particularly powerful. And to look at southern Italy today, the poor are still poor, and the collusion between the mafia and the government is destroying the land and hopes of the people. Last week, the New York Times ran an article about the seemingly intractable problems plaguing Naples – the stinking garbage that accumulated on the streets becoming the most visceral reminder of the city's stagnation. Artists in Naples – who once believed that their city's status as a cultural capital could be restored – are mostly in a state of despair.

Art historian Nicola Spinosa told the Times: "Today there is no longer a culture of illuminated leadership and Naples has become provincial, closed onto itself. Now it's just a producer of poverty, unemployment and trash, and I don't mean just the trash in the streets, which you can remove, but inside ourselves."

Italy's problems aren't only in the south. A rash of racist acts against African immigrants in the north – one man murdered because he supposedly stole a package of cookies from a shop – suggests that provincialism and hatred have no north-south borders.

I've been thinking about Italy during this extraordinary time in American culture and politics. We are weeks away from the possibility of electing our first African-American president. We, too, face forces of racism and provincialism that seek to destroy this possibility. But – and what a lovely but – a strong civic culture is simultaneously flourishing in America today. Voter registration rolls are growing throughout the country; young people across the land are enthusiastically waiting to cast their vote; and an Internet drive for campaign contributions has helped Barack Obama raise over 150 million dollars in the month of September alone.

If Obama wins, his victory may in part be due to another extraordinary phenomenon -- the dramatic downturn in the American economy. The politics of distraction placed us in a drowsy stupor for too many years. But this time many Americans are counting the days to depose the king who stole an election eight years ago, and say goodbye to his Republican heir.

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We are not the poor to whom Moravia refers. Rather, we are a rich nation with the ashy taste of loss in our mouths. We have lost money, jobs, a sense of security -- the essence of what it has meant to be an American in the postwar decades.

Can this loss spur us into action? If Obama wins the presidency, America will have surprised the rest of the world with our optimism and sense of hope. And why does America's potential feat seem unimaginable in Italy today -- or in its foreseeable future? It saddens me that the country of my grandparents seems all the more lost in its past and in its inability to move forward. For all my longing for an Italian past (and I certainly believe that my past defines a large part of who I am), I am grateful to have been raised in an American political tradition.

The current political discourse reminds me of an observation James Baldwin made in his collection of essays, *Notes of a Native Son*: "What time will bring Americans is at last their own identity."

This election has helped secure my sense of identity -- solidified the two sides of my hyphen. Genetically, I am the grandchild of southern Italians, but a liberal pluralistic tradition has shaped me politically.



America today is deeply split - one half wants to move forward, the other, like Italy itself, clings to the past. But if a majority of Americans decides to move forward, we will have accomplished the most formidable task. We can again export our hope and optimism to the rest of the world - allowing other countries to believe that anything is possible in America.

In the past few decades, I have looked across the Atlantic a few too many times, believing that my dreams might best be answered in Italy. But today, seeing the reality of Italian politics and the solidification of Mafia control, I am more clear-eyed. Time will bring Americans their own identity.

If the once impossible becomes possible - that the son of a white American woman and Kenyan man can become president of the United States - I can see how far this vision of America has carried us; I can better imagine the hope that my grandfather held. His family had next to nothing in southern Italy, and in his single most powerful act, he chose to leave that land behind.

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