
Giving Italy the boot

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Good Italy, Bad Italy: Why Italy Must Conquer Its Demons to Face the Future

by Bill Emmott

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If a pollster were to ask us which country we thought had produced Europe's greatest artists, which had built its most beautiful cities and which had provided the world with its finest singers and composers, most of us would put Italy in first or second place. And if we were asked which country had developed the best cuisine, which one contained the loveliest man-made landscapes and which had produced the most stylish designs in clothes and motor cars and many other things, we would also rate Italy highly, perhaps in the first four or five, certainly near the top of the premier league.

Yet if we were asked which country was the best governed, which one was the least corrupt, which has been the most successful in dealing with the problems of organised crime, we would be unlikely to place Italy even in the second or third division. And our judgement would be endorsed

almost universally. Take corruption as one example: according to the NGO Transparency International, Italy ranks in 69th place in the world corruptibility league, behind such countries as Georgia, Rwanda and Saudi Arabia; its score is closer to that of the bottom two, Somalia and North Korea, than to that of its neighbours, Austria and Switzerland.

The concept of 'Good Italy' and 'Bad Italy' is thus well-known to us all. In this engaging and stimulating book, Bill Emmott defines the difference between the two as:

A divide between selfish, closed, unmeritocratic and often criminal ways of doing things, and more open, community-minded and progressive ways.

In his early chapters he analyses the familiar bad — *l'inferno politico* and *il purgatorio economico* — before setting out in search of the Good, the real or potential *paradiso*.

As editor of the *Economist* at the time of Italy's elections in 2001, Emmott was responsible for the magazine's famous cover declaring Silvio Berlusconi unfit to govern Italy. (His target's fatuous response was to call the free-market publication the 'E-Communist' and point out that its editor had a beard like Lenin.) Now examining political Italy over the decade since those

elections (which Berlusconi won), Emmott accurately describes the goals of the former premier when in power as 'self-protection, self-enrichment, and ... the benefit of his friends and supporters'.

In a rather forced and self-conscious analogy with Dante, the author then introduces us to an economy in so purgatorial a condition that over the last decade its growth rate has been lower than that of every country in the world except Haiti and Zimbabwe. Here Emmott is at his strongest, dissecting labour laws so inflexible, service industries so backward and vested interests

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so determined to obstruct competition that the World Bank rates Italy below Albania as a country to do business in. It is now apparently easier to acquire an electricity supply in Sudan than it is in Italy.

Yet Emmott is an optimist, impatient of Italian fatalism and defeatism. After all, the country remains the second largest manufacturing nation in Europe, and it's still a place brimming with creativity and entrepreneurial endeavour. The author guides us along a path towards an Italian *paradiso*

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by way of factory visits to a chocolatier in Piedmont, a maker of cashmere clothes in Umbria and a manufacturer of gym equipment in Emilia-Romagna. These and similar places provide grounds for optimism, as do improvements in the judicial system in the north and the spread of youthful anti-mafia movements in the south.

We reach the end of the book, however, without feeling we have come very much closer to the frontiers of paradise. The author's optimism seems to dip too, and he becomes hortatory, urging the Italians 'to admit their sins' and 'face up to them' if their country is to prosper again. He urges such remedies as spending cuts and the liberalisation of the economy, but rather more is needed to remedy such 'sins' as bad universities, poor infrastructure and an economy unhealthily dependent on small businesses.

In the book's final paragraph, Emmott admits that the future of Italy — the chance of the Good overcoming the Bad — 'remains in the balance'. He also suggests, rather out of the blue, that Italians need to find a 'sense of common purpose'. This is of course another question that requires another book. If a century of propaganda from Mazzini to Mussolini didn't succeed in 'making Italians', such an ambition is surely unlikely to be achieved now.
