

NYT: WEEK IN REVIEW DESK

## THE WORLD: SET WAYS; Vive La Dolce Vita

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Published: April 16, 2006

ROME - JUST before the Italian election one of the country's leading newspapers, Corriere della Sera, led with an eye-catching headline: "Italian Forces Attacked in Afghanistan. An Architect Wounded."

I did not read the article in detail, so I cannot tell you how this architect came to volunteer to be with the Italian NATO contingent in Afghanistan. But his presence in the western city of Herat was somehow comforting, even if what had happened to him was not. Each country has its talents; Italy has a talent for beauty. This attribute is not easily measurable: no online graphic can illustrate it. Still, it is palpable, and an architect's cultural work in an ancient Afghan town seemed to me part of a particular Italian disposition.

The modern world does not like such particularities. The rapid movement across borders of capital, goods, labor, technologies and ideas -- the thing we call globalization -- is a process of accelerated convergence. It brings many welcome things, among them opportunity and cheap goods; it also stirs unease because its stamp is sameness and its pre-eminent criterion efficiency.

This unease has been evident in Europe of late. French youth, invoking revolution in the cause of stability, spent weeks in the street to protest and ultimately overturn a law that would have given them jobs at the price of losing existing guarantees against the abrupt termination of employment.

The proposal smacked too much of "precariousness" for the French. That is to say, it smacked too much of the market, of capitalism, of globalization, for it is in the nature of all these things to be changeable, dynamic and ultimately precarious. They opted, in short, for security over risk, a choice many Americans find puzzling.

Italians, too, are unhappy with the advance of "precariousness." This is still a society where a central goal is to be "sistemato" -- secured in a paid position, preferably not too labor intensive, that can be held for life and, if possible, passed on to the children.

But is such deep attachment to stability tenable? The general consensus is no. For Italy to survive in a global economy, now that it can no longer devalue the lira to boost its exports, it must become more efficient, more flexible, more precarious. It must dislodge the "sistematici" or get them to work harder. The same is true in much of the rest of Europe.

Such stasis is anathema to Americans, for whom risk, movement and personal ambition are fundamental. Immigrants, who propel constant shifts, protested, too, in recent days,

but their banners, saying "We Are America," proclaimed an essential truth: The United States is about the endless possibility of self-reinvention through hard work. It is inseparable from change.

When I became an American citizen last year, I was given a short English test in the form of a dictation. The first sentence was: "I want to be a good American." The second was: "I plan to work very hard every day."

No subtleties here: The prevailing ethos, the one that has carried generations of immigrants to prosperity, is inculcated from Day 1. "Americans are always at the new frontier, risking all, at least in our imaginations," said Robert Paxton, a historian of France. "But the French have not had a new frontier since the Middle Ages."

One way to view the French demonstrations and those by illegal immigrants in the United States, in fact, is as two faces of globalization: that of upheaval, resented by many Europeans, and that of possibility, embraced by Mexicans pouring over the border in search of work.

Italians tend to see more threat than possibility in the global forces propelling change. "We need to develop a more entrepreneurial spirit," said Luca Cordero di Montezemolo, the chairman of the automaker Fiat. He was at the Roman restaurant Piperno, which makes the best artichokes on earth, but that is another story, and one of art rather than efficiency. "We need more competition in universities, in our utilities, everywhere, but I doubt any leader can deliver that."

Who that leader will be after a knife-edge election is still not clear. Romano Prodi's left-of-center "Union" alliance won. Silvio Berlusconi, the right-wing prime minister, has refused to accept defeat. Political paralysis seems inevitable.

For energetic proponents of Italian change, that's bad news. But I wonder if this elaborate construct for immobility is not another expression of Italian genius, a way tens of millions of people have found to say that movement is unwelcome, especially of the abrupt kind.

France is also wary of change. There are many hugely successful entrepreneurs -- it is a French word, after all -- but the idea that one of them could become a national hero in the Bill Gates mode is unthinkable. So, too, is the notion that one of them might step into the political fray to explain why jobs with the risk of being fired may be better than no jobs at all.

Big enterprises, at some level, are about exploitation in France; the country's heroic narrative involves equality just as America's involves making it from nothing, as the millions of illegal immigrants working now as gardeners or cooks are trying to do.

Italy has more time for entrepreneurs than France, and its northern third is one of the most productive areas in the world. But having lived the rise and fall of empire, that is to

say of ambition, it is deeply attached to "dolce far niente" -- a pleasurable idleness woven into the texture of life.

As it happened, I read about the injured architect in the crumbling grounds of a small tennis club I frequented as a Rome-based correspondent more than 20 years ago. I'd not been back in a long time; it was reassuring to find it unchanged.

Or almost. The garden was a little more weed-ridden, the white plastic chairs a little dirtier, the wall a little more smothered in graffiti from rival soccer fans. And Luigi Olini, the kind caretaker, was dead, having succumbed to cancer on Feb. 26, 1994, as his widow, Assunta, told me. "Nothing you can do about that illness," she said with a shrug. "And here, things are about the same. There are some new members. They come and play at 1 o'clock, because, you know, they have to work in the morning."

Yes, I know, morning work, an unfortunate thing. I gazed at the club, a little miracle of inertia, prime real estate in the midst of Rome that the market and globalization and restless American ambition would have gobbled years ago and replaced with condos and a pool. Who was to say Italy was wrong to resist all that?

Assunta told me she still lived in an apartment at the club. Her two sons, ages 44 and 39, live with her. She's "sistematica," in a modest way, and so are her two big boys.

Those middle-aged men living with their mother are a little unusual, but only a little: Italian children leave home at an average age of 28. In a recent ruling, the Italian Supreme Court said a father could not cut off financial support to his daughter at the age of 26 even though she had a degree because of "the concrete difficulties today of young people in finding economic self-sufficiency."

Of course, that self-sufficiency might become more attainable if Italy accepted the modern world and swept away its islands of inertia. But then that little club would disappear and something of family life.

So, too, would the perfect bowl of rigatoni al pomodoro that Assunta served in the spring sun. Globalization has no place for such "dolce far niente." No wonder it is a contested process, here and in other less sunlit places with their own particularities of style and work and habit.

Drawing (Drawing by Ross MacDonald)

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