

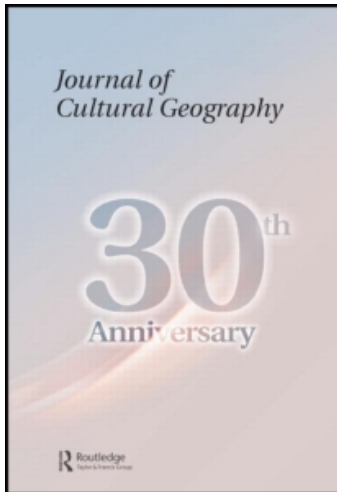
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Italian labyrinth

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The word *fieldwork* has always had an almost magical appeal for many geographers, even though it seems to cover everything from local field trips and boozy weekends in foreign places to narcissistic accounts of adventures that others are supposed to enjoy vicariously to a sustained residence leading to systematic study of a specific physical, biotic, or social phenomenon. Before the advent of mass tourism, “being there” had a cachet that self-evidently justified audacious generalizations based on fleeting impressions. Fortunately, those days are long gone. Nowadays, fieldwork in any defensible sense of the term is expected to be part of a proper research design. Preparation for it, such as learning a language, defining a research objective, and knowing something about the place you will visit, is as important as just showing up. Nevertheless, how any of us come to select some places for research and not others, and what it is we actually study there, are still largely serendipitous. That certainly is my story.

Finding Italy, Italy Finding Me

Reflecting on how I came to spend so much time in Italy and became fascinated with various aspects of Italy’s cities and political geography risks creating a teleological narrative in which “Italy” and I had some rendezvous with destiny. This is far from the truth. As a child I went to a school that taught Latin as a compulsory subject, and over a number of years I became absorbed by the history of the Roman Empire, how it had collapsed, and especially the travails of the city of Rome. Eternity and the knack of running a modern empire were buried and awaiting resurrection among the ruins of the great precursor Roman Empire and in the epithets of its great writers and poets (Settis 2006). Those years also provided the Latin groundwork for learning Italian in later years. Growing up in England in the 1950s and 1960s, I was also exposed to the popular view that Italians were not as “mature” politically and socially as northern Europeans, particularly the English. This found expression in jokes about the performance of the Italian armed forces during the Second World War

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as well as disdain that a cartoon-character buffoon like Mussolini could have ever had much public support if Italians were a “serious” people. Also pervasive was the still widespread view (in Britain and the United States) that Italian government and politics are the by-word for corruption and for turning a blind eye to the depredations of organized crime. The fact that my Scottish Presbyterian mother associated “Rome” negatively with the papacy and little else also made me wonder why this had happened given what I knew about the glorious history of ancient Rome. On the other side, my father was a great fan of Italian opera. He was also convinced that Italians made the world’s best ice cream and had a “healthier” outlook on life than the English. If he were still around he would admire the Italian “slow food” movement.

The 1960 Olympic Games brought the first turning point in my consciousness of Italy. I recall the English surprise that venues were ready on schedule and that arrangements went off like clockwork. I also remember the BBC documentaries stimulated by the Rome Games about the “new” Italy experiencing an “economic miracle” and the appearance in my everyday life of Italian-made products like the scooter my cousin Roger bought and the *Nutella* to which I became (and still am) addicted. I was also exposed to some Italian neo-realist cinema and by the close of the 1960s to the films of Fellini. As an undergraduate student in politics I was exposed to the writings of various Italian political theorists and philosophers, particularly Mosca, Michels, Croce, and Gramsci. These writers were all classified in terms of being proto-Fascist, Fascist, or anti-Fascist. As with English views of Germany, no one who taught about these writers and their texts could get much beyond The War, blamed conjointly on German Nazism, Italian Fascism and Japanese Militarism, even as this seemed increasingly irrelevant to many of us in an era dominated by the Vietnam War, student rebellions, and the African–American struggle for civil rights. The palpable decline of the British economy and the slow-motion collapse of the British Empire and withdrawal of British forces from the “global policing” role they had long carried out made the hubris of the Brits towards the Italians (and other lesser breeds) more than laughable, even contemptible.

In the 1970s I moved to the United States for graduate work in a program that had little time for either regional geography or fieldwork. My doctoral dissertation did involve, among other things, survey research by interviewing in one US and one English city neighborhood about residents’ perceptions of and reactions to public housing. But any “hanging out” or informal observation I did was purely incidental to a much more systematic approach to research. In the late 1970s, however, after I had taken a job at Syracuse University, I did begin to think seriously about the value of taking into account the character of different places as essential to both geographic research and geographical explanation. I had long been struck by how much cities owed to the

political frameworks in which they had developed rather than to the land-rent gradients and least-effort principles that seemed to be the basis of much of what went for urban geography in the 1970s. I also began to study various regionalist political movements around Europe, particularly the Scottish National Party, and why some countries, such as Italy, tended to have political parties whose votes were heavily concentrated geographically and how Italian and foreign academics and journalists explained this. Trips to Italy (and Yugoslavia, as it then was) in the late 1970s convinced me that I wanted to spend more time in both. The big advantage regarding Italy was that I could decode the language fairly easily. Serbo-Croatian was more of a challenge. I started reading Italian newspapers, magazines, and books with the help of a massive dictionary. Initially adept in spoken Italian, though almost entirely in the present tense, I jumped at the opportunity to teach in Syracuse University's Florence Program in 1984.

This was to be the second and most important turning point in my consciousness of Italy. Living in Florence with my family, my children attending the neighborhood elementary school, I was exposed to everyday life in a very particular Italian city. But lengthy trips to Rome, Venice and other Italian cities as well as a memorable summer vacation in Sicily, gave something of the geographical flavors to be found elsewhere in the country. So, it is from 1984–5 that my real first-hand knowledge of at least part of Italy actually dates. Since that time I have been a fairly regular visitor, living in Florence again in 1988–9, and visiting some northern towns, such as Varese, and Rome, Florence, and several southern cities, such as Salerno and Cosenza, on multiple occasions in the years since. My friendships formed primarily with people having similar academic interests but also with old neighbors. My increasing comfort with the “rules” of everyday life in different places (when during the day one starts saying “Buona sera,” for example, varies between Florence and Rome) makes returning ever easier. A series of accidents and incidental confluences, then, led to my initial interest in “Italy.” This is an enthusiasm that has only grown in the years since.

From the outset two features of living in Italy (as I experienced it) attracted me most of all. One was the everyday sociability which, at least at a superficial level, seemed to saturate everywhere you went and whatever you did: shopping in a range of small stores, morning cappuccino in the neighborhood bar, and waiting for the kids to come out of school were all marked by intense visual scrutiny and conversational interrogation. Obviously, some of this attraction to what could be an oppressive social surveillance for some locals was due to my coming from the anomic everyday of an American city. But some was just the sign that seemingly anonymous people actually had an interest in you. The other was the mystifying way in which, although the tasks of everyday life seemed to work rather well, unless you had to spend much time engaging

with state bureaucracy, there was a pervasive sense of social and political crisis. Although this was particularly apparent during the so-called “years of lead” of the 1970s and early 1980s when various leftist and neo-Fascist groups engaged in violent struggle with one another and the “state,” it has never disappeared. This clearly reflects the perpetual legitimacy crisis of successive Italian governments and the tension between an official “legalistic” Italy of courts, parliamentary debates, and formal political equality, on the one hand, and, on the other, a “real” Italy dependent on widespread off-the-books labor, high levels of tax evasion, and massive patronage politics. This Italian labyrinth is a challenge to crack. For someone long interested in the social basis of political order and the ways in which national political regimes and political parties attempt to achieve mass loyalty in the face of competing identities and interests, Italy was to be the perfect laboratory.

What have I studied about Italy?

I have tended to stay focused on several themes relating to the geography of Italian politics and what it may say more generally without any one replacing the others. One has been to study the geography of political polarization in Italy, partly using quantitative analysis of electoral data from the late 1940s to the present, but also relying on interviews with politicians and ordinary people in various parts of Italy. Between 1989 and 1994, for example, I spent several months in a number of communities in Lucca and Pistoia in central Italy interviewing active and retired local politicians to find out their views of why these two provinces had had such different political trajectories in terms of affiliation with the Communist and Christian Democratic parties from 1945 down until the collapse of both parties in 1990–92 (Agnew 2002, Chapter 6). More recently, I have turned my attention to the parties that replaced the two dominant old ones after 1992 when the end of the Cold War and the corruption scandals of that year brought the old party system crashing down. My particular focus has been on the remarkable career of Silvio Berlusconi as the leader of his own party, and how he has managed to put together a strange coalition on the center-right while successfully marginalizing what was once Europe’s most vibrant political left (Shin and Agnew 2008). Here again, however, the focus is on how Berlusconi has triumphed because of his ability to manage the peculiar local and regional bases to national political success that Italy presents.

Another theme on which I have spent much time while in Italy is the rise of the Northern League, a political party that since the late 1980s has helped to transform Italian national politics. Avowedly regionalist, claiming to represent the interests and identities of local areas in the Italian North, the League has gone through a number of ideological phases in which it has been alternately separatist and a partner since 1994

in a number of right-center Italian national coalition governments. It is in many respects a right-wing populist party with concerns very similar to the socially conservative political right in the United States; particularly in relation to tax burdens on small business, the evils of subsidizing undeserving groups and regions, and the threat of immigrants to local culture. My first personal knowledge of the League (the Lombard League as it then was) came about in 1989 when I was visiting the small northern Italian town of Gvirate and saw a flier advertising a rally featuring the League's leader Umberto Bossi. My friend Pierguido dismissed Bossi as a kook. By the mid-1990s, Pierguido had become a League supporter. Repeated visits to northern Lombardia in the late 1990s allowed me to build a picture of the League as representing and molding the ideas of small town northern Italians faced with an increasingly uncompetitive position in the world economy and a deepening sense of a Roman government out of touch with their needs (Agnew 2002, Chapter 8).

Somewhat tangential to these concerns with the contemporary, I have also been fascinated with how the city of Rome has figured into Italian political imaginations and become the site of commemoration for them since it became the capital of the newly unified Italy in 1871. In the summer of 1992 I spent several months exploring both the historic core and the largely post-Second World War periphery of the city. I also enjoyed some days in conversation with city officials and academics who have studied the city. The net result of this and some archival research was a book on a modern Rome as a composite landscape (Agnew 1995). As part of this larger project I also concentrated on the manipulations of public or monumental space in the city center introduced during the so-called Liberal (1870–1922) and Fascist (1923–1943) eras. My initial purpose was to show how difficult it had been to create a truly “new” capital for modern Italy on top of a city with such powerful pre-existing images and messages drawn from two thousand years of history as the seat of a great empire and then as the headquarters of a Catholic (and universalist) Church (Agnew 1998). Later I became concerned that much recent writing about the modern monumentality of Rome, following the fashion of the so-called cultural turn in Italian historiography, has tended to confuse the *intentions* of the regime, particularly that of Fascism, with the *outcome* achieved in manipulating the form of the city (Agnew 2010).

I have had one Italian project that has been much more bookish than the others. This is about the political and economic images of Italy that can be found among foreign scholars and journalists and how these are then recycled among Italians (Agnew 1997). One of the most important has been the image of Italy as “backward” relative to the more thoroughly modern Europe to the north and west. Within Italy this is then used to distinguish between a recalcitrant and culturally deficient South (infested by *mafia* and other forms of organized criminality, suffering from a banal “amoral familism” in which people are basically clannish and afflicted by

patronage politics) and a morally superior North (locomotive of Italian economic growth, land of virtuous entrepreneurship, seat of Italian medieval and Renaissance civilization). This geographical categorization and the theoretical logic upon which it rests is at the heart of some of the most popular accounts of Italian politics in English such as the now “classic,” if notorious, book of Edward Banfield (1957) *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society* and Robert Putnam’s (1993) well reviewed *Making Democracy Work*. Much of their appeal is that they rely on “fieldwork,” notwithstanding their theoretical deficiencies. Fieldwork isn’t magical, unfortunately. More historically sophisticated and geographically subtle works such as Joseph LaPalombara’s *Democracy, Italian Style* (1987) and Filippo Sabetti’s *The Search for Good Government* (2000) are all but ignored because they do not fit the presuppositions of foreigners and many Italians about the essential character of Italy as a whole and the South in particular.

This is not to say that Italy does not have a deep and persistent uneven development, with the North-South division as perhaps its most important feature. But in my view this has much to do with how Italy was integrated as a modern state so that much of the South was brought to heel militarily and without popular local enthusiasm (e.g., Barbagallo 1994). The years after unification brought economic policies that further disadvantaged the South to the net benefit of an industrializing North. Ever since that time the South has been viewed as a source of labor for the North, a reservoir of votes to be bought with government largesse that does not usually translate into spending on sustained development projects, and a dumping ground for waste disposal and other noxious activities. Organized crime has long been and remains a major drag on southern economic development, even as the criminals themselves have nationalized and globalized their activities in drugs, vice, and money laundering (Sciarrone 1998; Glenny 2008). In a recent project, I have examined the trend since the 1980s in the geography of Italian exports, showing how much the historic industrial core of Italy in the Northwest and a new cluster in the Northeast have continued to eclipse export growth elsewhere (Shin *et al.*, 2006; more generally, see Malanima and Zamagni 2010; Vasta 2010). Italy remains very divided economically even if the overall geographical pattern has shifted somewhat in recent years. Historic patterns of uneven development such as that between the Italian North and South are very difficult to change (Barca 2006; Ricolfi 2007). In Italy’s case, they seem wired into the very economic structure of the peninsula.

How has Italy changed since the early 1980s?

But not all is stasis in Italy; far from it. More than that, much of the change has operated differentially across the country. So, the internal

geography is dynamic rather than fixed. Obviously, identifying the various changes and ordering them in some way is open to discussion. What follows is not just my “list” but also reflects what Italian academics and journalists have had to say about the course of the past forty years in Italy.

Perhaps the most visible and most important political change has been the dual rise of Silvio Berlusconi as the central figure in Italian national politics and the relative decline of what was once Europe’s strongest political left. The Cold War division of Europe actually ran through Italy until 1992. From 1948 until 1992 the generally US-leaning Christian Democrats had dominated Italian governments with the popular Italian Communist Party as the main opposition but perpetually excluded from the possibility of governing nationally because of its historic associations of the Soviet Union. The main areas of support for the Communist Party in Central Italy have remained the main reservoirs of votes for the successor parties to the Communists, but overall levels of support have eroded. The new parties are no longer “grounded” locally in the way the old Communist Party was. Ideological sectarianism, a lack of charismatic and forceful leadership, the decline of a unitary narrative about social class, anti-clericalism, and collective interests, and the difficulty of countering Berlusconi’s “sound bite” politics based on consumerism, the politics of material envy, and anti-immigrant hysteria have conspired to produce a left that is out of touch with the times and faced with difficulties even in its regional “strongholds,” let alone in places where it never had much of a hold (Alfieri 2008; Barengi 2008; Bonomi 2008; Diamanti 2009; Ricolfi 2008a). At the same time, Berlusconi, partly by allying himself with parties having substantial local and regional roots (that they continue to nurture) and partly because of his ability as the owner of the main private TV channels (a licensing gift from his political mentor in the 1980s, then prime minister Bettino Craxi) to massage public opinion, has become the central political figure in the country (Sartori 2009). Even though his reputation has been battered by sexual scandals, repeated legal indictments for criminal business practices, and the deteriorating condition of the Italian economy, he is in 2010 the main topic of political conversation and still the most powerful political figure in the country. The danger is that in his aftermath, there may be a “loss of any collective sense and of memory” (Maltese 2009, p. 16). Berlusconi in using office for personal ends “has enervated parliament, the judicial system, freedom of information, the schools” (Maltese 2009, p. 15).

Famously, Italy was long a country of emigrants. Millions of people, overwhelmingly but not entirely from the South, emigrated to the United States, Brazil, Australia, Germany, Switzerland, and other countries. Since the 1980s this pattern has reversed. Italy has become the latest European country to experience a major influx of immigrants, largely from North Africa and Eastern Europe (e.g., Colombo and Sciortino 2002). The demographic reality is that Italy has one of the

lowest birth rates in the world and some industrial sectors (textiles, leather production, agricultural production, etc.) that remain heavily labor intensive in some phases. An intriguing example comes from the city of Prato near Florence where a declining textile industry has been revived by what became in the 2000s not only the largest concentration of Chinese immigrant labor but also of Chinese-owned sweatshop factories in Europe. As of early 2010, 4,200 Chinese companies were registered in Prato; of the one-third of its population of 180,000 who were immigrants about 40,000 were ethnic Chinese (Dinmore 2010). The Chinese ownership reflects the attraction of Prato because of the “Made in Italy” label they can pin on their garments, their closeness to the Milan fashion industry, and the price advantage of being within the European Union. The Chinese immigrants provide very cheap labor to the Chinese firms that smuggle them into the country. Immigrants, and not just those without documentation, have become a major political issue. Some immigrants, particularly Roma and Albanians, are accused of high levels of criminality, as if Italians themselves were somehow immune! The right-center parties, in particular the Northern League, have made turning back, imprisoning, and repatriating immigrants central parts of their political platforms. Ironically, it is the leader of the erstwhile neo-Fascist party, now unified with Berlusconi’s party, Gianfranco Fini, who has spoken out most rationally about immigration, pointing to the importance of immigrants in the performance of the Italian economy and stressing the importance of cultural integration rather than socio-political isolation. The Italian political left, like the left elsewhere in Europe, has found it hard to deal with this challenge, not least because many workers fear job competition from immigrants and complain about the pressure immigrants can put on public services. Fearful of abandoning multiculturalism for cultural integrationism, the political left remains without much, if any, viable strategy for countering the politics of fear and resentment now associated with immigration.

On a cultural-intellectual plane, a major shift has been in judgments about the past, particularly the Fascist period and the years of civil war from 1943 to 1945. A recent shifting intellectual sensibility about Fascism, includes a notable tendency to see it as an innovative and even exciting break with what came before, and to evaluate its works in terms of the political intents of its protagonists more than the actual outcomes. This movement has paralleled efforts to rehabilitate the regime in popular consciousness (e.g., Orsina 2010). This is a sea change since the 1980s when talk of Fascism typically reflected how the anti-Fascism of the last years of the Second World War had cleansed Italy of a dreadful movement that had provided an unnecessary detour or parenthesis in Italian history. Some of this relates to the arrival in national government of politicians, such as Gianfranco Fini, mentioned earlier, with a desire to “normalize” the Fascist period or at least to present Italy as a victim as much as a

predator on the road to the Second World War and its consequences, such as the loss of Istria, and the damage to Italy's reputation from the Fascist dictator Mussolini's fatal embrace of Hitler as an ally after 1938. Culturally this change is significant in undermining the common narrative of anti-Fascism that underpinned all major political parties except for the extreme right from 1945 until the 1980s.

During that time, some issues, such as the depredations of organized crime in Sicily and elsewhere in Italy, and environmental problems associated with the growth of manufacturing industries with large amounts of toxic waste, attracted little or no popular attention. Beginning first with the trials of major Mafia figures in the late 1980s and through the recent linking together of Neapolitan organized crime (Camorra) with disposal of toxic waste from northern Italy (as well as crime's role in illegal immigration and the underground and illicit economies that may constitute fully 25% of the real Italian economy) these issues have finally become politically significant (e.g., Saviano 2006). The question of municipal-waste disposal in Naples was exploited successfully by Berlusconi as an issue in the 2008 national election. He may have had some local "helpers" in creating the crisis in the first place during the tenure of the previous short-tenured center-left government of Romano Prodi. The high level of corruption in government contracts for all public works schemes in the South and everywhere in the aftermath of disasters such as earthquakes remains a major problem. So-called rent-seeking behavior (finding captive investments that deliver a financial return without much entrepreneurial effort or innovation) remains a major path to wealth and power in Italy.

In a number of respects, however, Italy has experienced a retrenchment of cultural and political features that were thought of as fading away or under stress in the 1980s. For one thing, recruitment into political and administrative posts is as patronage driven as ever. Indeed, in some sectors, such as universities, decisions on appointments and promotions in a notoriously centralized system are even more personalized and particularistic than before the 1980s when parties provided something of a mediating device. Government contracting decisions and political candidatures, particularly in Berlusconi's party, are now based almost entirely on personal connections rather than on talent or merit for the job in question (Diamanti 2009; Celli 2009). In everyday life, the culture of "recommendation" and payoffs is pervasive (Cazzola 1992; Zinn 2001). A widespread localism and provincialism also increasingly characterizes the country. Editorial writers in the main national newspapers comment extensively on the decline of patriotism, the lack of a sense of nation, and a rising hostility to strangers and immigrants from beyond local confines. Ironically, given its overall much higher level of economic development, it is northern Italy that is most obviously at the vanguard of these trends. The so-called nationalization thesis that as countries modernize they lose

local or parochial attachments seems anything but true in Italy. If anything *gemeinschaft* (community) is now replacing *gesellschaft* (society), to reverse the order of the terms in which the “necessary transition” is typically put (Diamanti 2006).

Finally, the Catholic Church, rather than fading as a domestic social and political actor as the Christian Democratic Party disappeared and secularization spread across Italian society, has taken on a new more powerful role in Italian culture and society. From one viewpoint, this is because the right-center has been in national political office for twelve of the past eighteen years. It has tended, although again Gianfranco Fini is something of an exception, to favor official Church positions on issues of recently increased cultural salience such as end-of-life, bioengineering, and gay marriage. In another perspective, however, secularization was always exaggerated because of an excessive focus on regular church attendance and declining subscriptions to Church publications. In fact, the Catholic Church simply because it is headquartered in Italy and has had such a long history of continuity or presence in the country, has managed not only to maintain but also to extend its cultural influence not least through its control over life-course rituals at a time of increased anxiety about questions of birth and death (Diamanti and Ceccarini 2007; Garelli 2007).

When I first set foot in Italy, the theme of “Made in Italy” as a trope representing the originality and high quality of Italian-made goods outside the country was possibly at its height. Although many Italian brands retain excellent reputations, the Italian economy as a whole and its reliance on exporting consumer goods, many of which require significant inputs of labor in a world economy in which China and other “emerging economies” have a distinct advantage, has lost much of the verve that it had forty years ago. Alongside declining comparative advantage, there has been a real decline in technological innovation, an increased financialization of the economy (as in other previously “industrial” economies) with more energy put into circulating financial products than into manufacturing investment (recall the bankruptcy of the agribusiness Parmalat in 2003 for financial manipulation), declining efficiency in public administration, and an overall decrease in national economic “competitiveness” (e.g., Ricolfi 2008b; Vasta 2010; Dicks 2010). Michelangelo Vasta (2010, p. 153) well captures the contemporary difficulties for the export economy as a whole when he writes: “Italy is still famous in the world for its capacity to produce and export goods of outstanding quality such as silk ties by Marinella, Arco lamps by Castiglioni brothers or top quality suits by Giorgio Armani. Will this be sufficient to sustain the economic growth of a country with 60 million inhabitants?” Perhaps even more critically, however, Italy’s public sector (e.g., pension liabilities, an ageing population increasing healthcare expenditures, and corrupt public contracting) is likely to be a continuing drag on the national economy as a whole.

Luca Ricolfi (2008b, p. 83) identifies the root of the problem when, in referring to government policies pursued in the early 2000s, he writes:

What we have advantaged in these years is an unannounced cocktail of Keynesian policies (deficit spending) and free-market measures (tax reductions). It is not difficult to understand the reasons for these choices: in an unexpected and perhaps unforeseeable situation of persisting economic stagnation, the government has considered it more important to avoid a crisis of political consensus than to relaunch the competitiveness of the system.

Italy looks very much like a prototype of what Gopal Balakrishnan (2009) calls, in light of the global financial meltdown of 2007–9, the “stationary state:” an economy with very poor growth prospects for the foreseeable future.

Italian labyrinth

Perhaps the greatest appeal of fieldwork in and on Italy is the element of surprise that surrounds everything that you do. There is an element of mystery and opaqueness about how things are done that often defies the application of the simple nostrums that usually work very well elsewhere. Some of this is due to being a foreigner without the requisite induction into the taken-for-granted norms that govern everyday life. And, as in all foreign fieldwork, keeping the historical and geographical dimensions of Italian politics and society in sight at the same time from the vantage point of a single person in only one place at a time is a challenge. All told, the mythic Italy of English “Chianti-shire” fame might still have lingering effects on the geographical imagination I have brought to Italy. But it has been against the exoticized and “museumified” version of Italy that my forays into Italian fieldwork have been directed. It is precisely those stereotypes about people and places that geographical fieldwork should be working to confront. Much of what I see in Italy isn’t so foreign after all. Despite the country’s evident particularities, much of what I have written about above could well apply to many other countries as well if not in exactly the same combinations. Different, yes, but after all these years Italy is not as exceptional as I thought it was before I first set foot in Florence.

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