

Looking for a silver lining

Can Italy conquer its economic and cultural demons?
A former Economist editor weighs the evidence



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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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The premise of this book is essentially a decent one: while never losing sight of the many reasons for pessimism, it is a quest to find cause for optimism about the state of the Italian nation. Bill Emmott, a former editor of *The Economist*, essentially divides the country into the forces for good and bad and, holding the scales, watches which way they tip.

It is a tribute to Emmott's honesty that, while clearly yearning to find positive things to say, he never pulls his punches. In the past 20 years, he writes, the Catholic Church has been guilty of being a "collaborator" with the Silvio Berlusconi circus. The country's debt is the third largest in the world in absolute terms. He condemns "individual and clannish selfishness...corruption and criminality...the urge to seek power in order to use it for self-interested purposes...destructive disregard for any wider community or, especially, national interests". "Bad Italy" he likens to a cancer that could cause "decline and even disaster".

The book's focus is

Representing 'bad Italy': Silvio Berlusconi



largely economic, and in subsequent chapters there are plenty of numbers to justify such pessimism. The country's corruption costs Italy 60 billion euros a year. There are a staggering 72,000 official cars in the country; as many as 600,000 people have incomes directly connected to political activity. Newspapers are read by only 11.5% of people in Italy, as compared to 33.2% in Britain, meaning that the vast majority (more than 80%) get their news from television, much of which is owned by you-know-who. In terms of enforcing contracts, the World Bank ranked Italy 157th out of 183 countries.

Corruption costs Italy 60 billion euros a year



Emmott's laments are familiar to anyone who has lived in or studied contemporary Italy: stifling unionism, ambiguous attitudes towards paying taxes and legality, a lack of meritocracy, the preservation of exclusive guilds and orders; the presence of a politician in Berlusconi who pretends to be a liberal but is really a protectionist. Justice is so convoluted that the author cites one example of a case that took 44 years to reach a resolution. In the

first decade of this century, the country's national income per head actually shrank, meaning that of all the countries for which GDP figures are published, only Haiti and Zimbabwe did worse.

The trouble is, the first half of the book is so convincing that the second half — enumerating the reasons for hope — is far less so. Emmott travels to Turin, seeking out Carlo Petrini, the founder of the Slow Food movement. The idea is to suggest that the organisation is a model of how to organise a national network and how to combine financial, philosophical and gastronomic gain. He goes to the Egyptian museum in the city, quoting an almost doubling of visitor figures as a testament to what happens when a hard-headed outsider (the Greek American Eleni Vassilika) manages to rattle the cage. Neither example, it seems to me, is particularly powerful.

There are various discussions with anti-mafia campaigns such as Addiopizzo ("goodbye, protection money"), Libera Terra, Libero Futuro, E Adesso Ammaz-zateci Tutti ("now kill us all"). The ages of the founders are, admittedly, remarkable: the founders of the first were between 26 and 30, and of the last 21. Youth, as always, may well offer hope. And yet one of the Sicilian businessmen who Emmott interviews shocks him with his prediction of the future for the island: "Misery, a misery that will affect us all."

Successful entrepreneurs are the last witnesses called to the stand. The usual suspects are interviewed or discussed: Italy's richest man, the chocolate magnate Michele Ferrero; Leonardo Del Vecchio, the glasses manufacturer; Nerio Alessandri, the founder of Technogym; Brunello Cucinelli, the cashmere man in Umbria. But in the end, despite his noble efforts, Emmott never quite clinches the case that the scales are

tipping towards what he calls "Good Italy".

The reason may be that the book is sandwiched between two other, remarkably similar projects: *Forza, Italia* was Emmott's tome from 2010 (untranslated from the Italian) about how Italy could relaunch itself post-Berlusconi; and, as he

twice mentions in the acknowledgments, he has been working on a documentary film on the same subject. It might be that the focus of the quest was slightly blurred; or just that a man described nowadays as that nebulous thing, "a commentator on international affairs", doesn't know Italy quite as well as he knows its numbers.

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