



# Oh for a new risorgimento

Italy needs to stop blaming the dead for its troubles and get on with life, says John Prideaux

Jun 9th 2011 | from the print edition

1 [Like](#)

ON A WARM spring morning in Treviso, a town in Italy's north-east, several hundred people have gathered in the main square, in the shadow of a 13th-century bell tower, to listen to speeches. The crowd is so uniformly dressed, in casually smart clothes and expensive sunglasses, that an outsider might assume invitations to this event had been sent out weeks ago. Most people are clutching plastic flags on white sticks. Some of them carry children wearing rosettes in red, white and green. On a temporary stage a succession of speakers talk about the country's glorious history. Italy has taken the day off to celebrate its 150th anniversary as a nation.



Art Archive

Treviso's mayor, Gian Paolo Gobbo, is not celebrating. The desk in his office faces a large painting of Venice in the style of Canaletto. This has some significance for Mr Gobbo, who has spent his political career fighting to resuscitate the Republic of Venice, which finally expired in 1797 after a long illness. Below the painting stands a fluorescent-green bear. "It's just like me!" exclaims the mayor, a portly man in his 60s. Green is the colour of the Northern League, a party which has sometimes toyed with the idea of breaking up Italy and allowing the northern part of the country to go it alone. This particular bear wears a sword, a gift from a champion fencer who is one of the town's famous sons. Mr Gobbo's opponents might claim that the bear resembles him in another way: last year the mayor was charged with having been part of an armed gang in the 1990s, a low-grade militia intended to protect Treviso. He denies the charges.

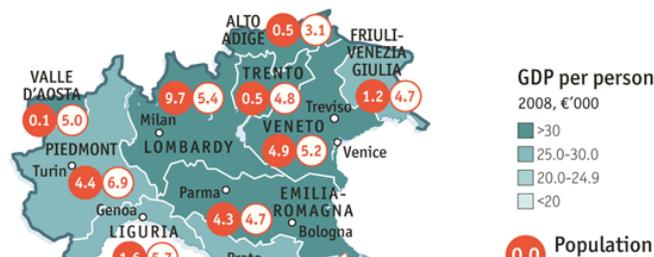
Italy's unification is contentious because many people trace the country's current troubles back to the birth of a nation that, they say, was misconceived. In the run-up to the anniversary an effigy of Giuseppe Garibaldi, the great hero of unification (pictured above), a sort of 19th-century Che Guevara but with better politics, was burned in the Veneto region. The Northern League, which governs in coalition with Silvio Berlusconi's People of Freedom party in Rome, objected to having a public holiday dedicated to an event that it regards as a catastrophe. Unification, the party argues, yoked the poor, corrupt, lazy south to the go-ahead north to the detriment of both. Garibaldi did not unite Italy, the Northern League is fond of saying; he divided Africa.

From the other end of the peninsula the anniversary can look equally bleak. In the 18th century Naples was the third-largest city in Europe after London and Paris. Before being incorporated into Italy it was the capital city of a great monarchy; now it is ruled by a clique of inept politicians. These days the city is almost as famous for its stinking mounds of uncollected rubbish as for the bay

## In brief

### Key figures

GDP 2010: €1.5 trn  
 Per person, 2010: €25,600  
 Average annual % change, 2001-10: 0.25%  
 Government spending As share of GDP, 2010: 50.5%  
 Exchange rates, May 30th 2011  
 1€ = \$1.43 ¥115 £0.87



and the volcano that delighted Goethe and many other visitors before and since. Though the south of Italy benefits from transfers from central government, it does not show much gratitude towards the wealthier northerners, nor enthusiasm for commemorating unification. "Terroni", a bestselling book by Pino Aprile published last year, compared the northern troops who supposedly liberated the south in the 1860s to the Nazis.

All countries argue about their history. America's recent commemoration of the 150th anniversary of its civil war saw plenty of conflict between

nostalgics for the old South, with all its carbuncles, and fans of Abraham Lincoln. But it is hard to find anybody in America who thinks that the states should never have been united. Italy is different. Plenty of people feel that the regions making up the country were too distinct to be squeezed into a single nation and that, as a result, Italy has shallow roots. According to this line of thinking, the lack of consent to the national project has resulted in weak institutions and dysfunctional government. Manlio Graziano's "The Failure of Italian Nationhood" and David Gilmour's "The Pursuit of Italy", the two most serious attempts to grapple with Italy's first 150 years, both take this view. In political terms, the rise and rise of the separatist Northern League over the past 15 years, to a point where it now occupies key ministries in Rome, underlines the power of this idea.

One reason why the past seems to have an unusually strong hold over the present in Italy is that the country's long-term problems seem impervious to changes of party, government or constitution. The most striking of these is the north-south divide. Most countries have richer regions and poorer ones. What is unusual about Italy is the south's failure in recent years to catch up with the north in any way at all. Data from the Bank of Italy show that GDP per person is over 40% lower in the south than in the centre and north, and has been for the past 30 years (though there was some catching up before then). A third of Italy's population lives in the south, making it "the largest and most populated underdeveloped region in the euro area", according to Mario Draghi, the bank's governor.

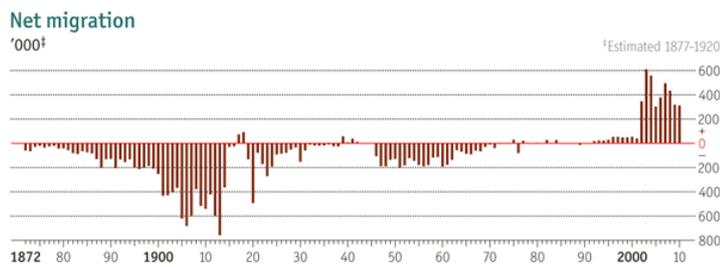


What has caused this strange predictability? Since the publication of Robert Putnam's book "Making Democracy Work" in 1993, the main explanation put forward has been that the self-governing communes and city states that sprang up in the north of the country during the late Middle Ages built up reserves of social capital (or trust in fellow citizens) that have proved remarkably enduring. The south of the country, ruled by a monarchy and characterised by large landholdings worked by peasants, lacked this crucial resource. Three economists who studied this subject recently, Luigi Guiso of the European University Institute, Paola Sapienza of Northwestern University and Luigi Zingales of the University of Chicago, found that at least half of the gap in social capital between the north and south is due to the absence of free city-states in the south.

This argument quickly becomes defeatist. If Italy's problems really date back to the political vacuum created by the collapse of the Roman Empire and the emergence of the three main types of government, then perhaps it is time to give up and sip Campari with orange on the Amalfi coast instead. Fortunately Italy's complex history can explain only so much.



To begin with, the monarchy supposedly responsible for the south's current troubles was not unlike the governments that for centuries ruled France, Spain, Britain and what was to become Germany. It is not obvious that these countries were held back.



True, Italy was created by a small elite at a time when more than 90% of the peninsula's inhabitants did not speak Italian. But inventing nations, along with spurious myths and traditions to anchor them, was a popular recreation among educated Europeans in the 19th century. Some managed it more successfully than others, but Italy's experience was not atypical. Indeed, nations are constantly making and unmaking themselves. Metternich, the 19th-century Austrian statesman who famously slighted Italy as a "mere geographical expression", was ambassador of a country that became an empire and then splintered into many pieces within 60 years of his death. And in the 20th century many European countries suffered horrors that make Italy's supposedly pernicious historical inheritance seem mild. It can even be argued that Italy's current lack of national pride is the mark of a civilised place. Earlier outbreaks of jingoistic nationalism led to ill-starred adventures in Abyssinia and the second world war; to mourn its absence seems perverse.

Infographic sources:  
Bank of Italy; OECD; UN; "International Historical Statistics" by Brian Mitchell; national statistics; The Economist; Thomson Reuters; Calderoni, Global Crime 2011



**Meh to Metternich**

This special report will argue that the cause of Italy's present unease is much more recent. Between 2000 and 2010 Italy's average growth, measured by GDP at constant prices, was just 0.25% a year. Of all the countries in the world, only Haiti and Zimbabwe did worse. Many things contribute to these gloomy figures. Italy has become a place that is ill at ease in the world, scared of globalisation and immigration. It has chosen a set of policies that discriminate heavily in favour of the old and against the young. Combined with an aversion to meritocracy, this is driving large numbers of talented young Italians abroad. In addition, Italy has failed to renew its institutions and suffers from debilitating conflicts of interest in the judiciary, politics, the media and business. These are problems that concern the nation as a whole, not one province or another. They have not been helped by Mr Berlusconi's incumbency in the Palazzo Chigi, the prime minister's official residence (which, in a characteristic confusion of public duty and private pleasure, he tends to avoid in favour of his own residence nearby, one of many). It is time for Italy to stop blaming the dead for its difficulties, to wake up and have a shot of that delectable coffee it makes.

from the print edition | [Special reports](#)

[About The Economist online](#) [About The Economist](#) [Media directory](#) [Staff books](#) [Career opportunities](#) [Contact us](#) [Subscribe](#)

[\[+\] Site feedback](#)

Copyright © The Economist Newspaper Limited 2011. All rights reserved. [Advertising info](#) [Legal disclaimer](#) [Accessibility](#) [Privacy policy](#) [Terms of use](#)

[Help](#)