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SOCIETY/ITALY

15.

RISE AGAIN

Despite the upheaval, Italy will get back on its feet.

By Gianni Riotta

At the beginning of the year, Italy was a pretty busy country. The fabled Sanremo Music Festival, a song contest, was imminent. Despite being the only G8 nation still mired in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, Italy's front pages were filled with coverage of corny music, petty squabbling between parties in prime minister Giuseppe Conte's fragile coalition and howls about football or a famous restaurant – God forbid – losing a Michelin star. On 19 January, while news about the coronavirus epidemic in China skyrocketed, there were warnings from data scientists at our Rome-based journalism research centre Luiss Datalab and on the social-media platforms of the daily *La Stampa* that something terrible was coming.

It fell on deaf ears; there were a few jeers in the comments and that was it. Then the virus hit the richest areas, Milan and Venice, killed thousands of innocent people, shut the fashion shops and the Sistine Chapel, and emptied the restaurants where I lead my nomadic life: Dal Bolognese and Hostaria Da Pietro in Rome, Trattoria Milanese in Milan, and Gigi Mangia in my beloved hometown of Palermo.

I am keenly aware that our philosophers, gurus, theologians and influencers are penning and posting harrumphing paragraphs, solemnly stating that, after the virus, Italy will be a different country. Professor Gravedigger predicts that we will fall prey to neo-fascist Black Shirts who will fester on the failure of our leaders, while Dr Pollyanna foresees that we will be transformed, helping each other like brothers. Do not believe the hype:

After the pandemic we will have to shape up, getting rid of our debt not because some zealot says so but because otherwise we'll never be able to invest in future generations

after the pandemic, Italy will be Italy, just as after the First World War and the Second World War, Italy was Italy.

Many Anglo-Saxon scholars, from Edward Banfield in 1955 to Robert Putnam in 2000, have enjoyed a bit of a condescending postcolonial attitude dissecting the “weak Italian identity”. Actually Italians – despite their reputation for being individualists, closer to family than civic institutions – do have a powerful cultural genetic code, albeit a subtle one that is often invisible to foreigners. This deeply entrenched Italian DNA will kick in when the pandemic eases, just like it did at every crucial crossroads in our modern history.

However, Italians will have to make a choice: do the right thing or walk into utter disaster, oblivious of foreign pundits, domestic naysayers and graph-filled op-eds in financial newspapers. After the pandemic we will have to shape up, getting rid of our debt not because some zealot says so but because, otherwise, we'll never be able to invest in future generations. We should, at long last, embrace the power of the digital world, not to show off our new smartphones but to give our small and medium-sized companies a long-awaited chance to grow.

The choice is there: progress or perish. I bet that Italians will make the right choice at the very last moment. Do not ask me why, I just feel it. After all, I too was born and bred in the old country. — (M)

About the author: A columnist for *La Stampa*, Riotta is dean of the Luiss School of Journalism in Rome and a professor of Italian studies at Princeton in New Jersey.



IMAGE: Shutterstock, Stephen Kellaghan



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DIPLOMACY/USA

16.

Altered states

Former UN ambassador Samantha Power on why the Trump administration has got it all wrong.

By Ed Stocker



constrained environment, do we all walk and chew gum at the same time.

How will brand America emerge from this? Will it help to cement China's ascendancy?

Both the US and the Chinese brands have been hurt profoundly by their handling of the crisis. It has drawn attention to the Chinese cover-up in the earliest phases of the epidemic. There are reports of China using the vulnerability of countries to gain access to natural resources and support – that's not going to do wonders for Chinese soft power. On the US side, the home of Silicon Valley, the home of more Nobel prize-winners than any country, can't produce a test.

In 2014, under Barack Obama's presidency, Samantha Power was involved in diplomatic efforts during the Ebola outbreak in West Africa. Here, the former US ambassador to the UN contemplates the future of diplomacy in the aftermath of the coronavirus outbreak. — (M)

Has damage been done to global institutions as a result of coronavirus and will it lead to more isolationism – or do you think it could flip the other way?

It really could cut in either direction. This pandemic is reinforcing what people believed before the crisis. If you believe that international institutions help settle colossal collective-action problems, then the lesson that you are taking out of this is that the World Health Organization needs to have more authority and more resources. If you go in believing that you shouldn't trust international organisations because foreigners work in them, then you say to yourself, “Gosh, we need to pull up stakes, we need to cut funding to an institution like this.”

You've seen stirrings from the Trump administration about potentially proposing an alternative global-health infrastructure; I expect that would be one much more under US control. So I think that your predisposition tells you a lot about whether you're going to want to retreat from international organisations or seek to strengthen them.

How did the US reaction to Ebola compare with now?

They are very different pandemics but the recognition that President Obama had was that US security was tied to the fates of people living elsewhere. That premise might seem like a statement of the obvious in the 21st century but, nonetheless, it's a highly contested proposition – it's not a premise that animates Donald Trump at all. If you have a sense that your own national security is tied to the fate of others, then from the beginning you are thinking about how, in a resource-

And President Trump shows the same disposition to tell lies and to traffic misinformation and disinformation. This is immensely damaging to the picture that people have of whether the US is a reliable, credible and competent democracy.

What positives have you seen?

What you see going on inside countries is downright inspiring: these pairing services between people who have needs and people who have spare capacity. If you think about the credibility deficits that many of our leaders have, the fact that citizens have been willing to adhere to the strictures [of physical distancing] is the reason that the curves have been flattened in many places. You could potentially see much more civic engagement from people on the other side of this.

And then there's been the successes of female leadership.

People were writing Angela Merkel's political obituary what feels like only weeks ago. There's her scientific mastery and her no-nonsense decisiveness but also the fact that she just genuinely cares and manages to emit – despite her steely exterior – a humanity through it all. Jacinda Ardern in New Zealand has again shown that combination of rigour and decisiveness – leadership qualities that have been associated with men for so long – but with such a rich humanity and compassion. What's nice is the knock-on effect on the future of young boys and girls seeing these female leaders. That changes children's sense – and everyone's sense, really – of what leadership can look like. It might bring out a gentler, more tender side in male leaders as well because it really is what you need in a crisis like this; it's not just the tough exterior but also a show of great empathy for what people are going through.

About the interviewee: The US ambassador to the UN from 2013 to 2017, Pulitzer prize-winning author Power is currently a professor at Harvard.