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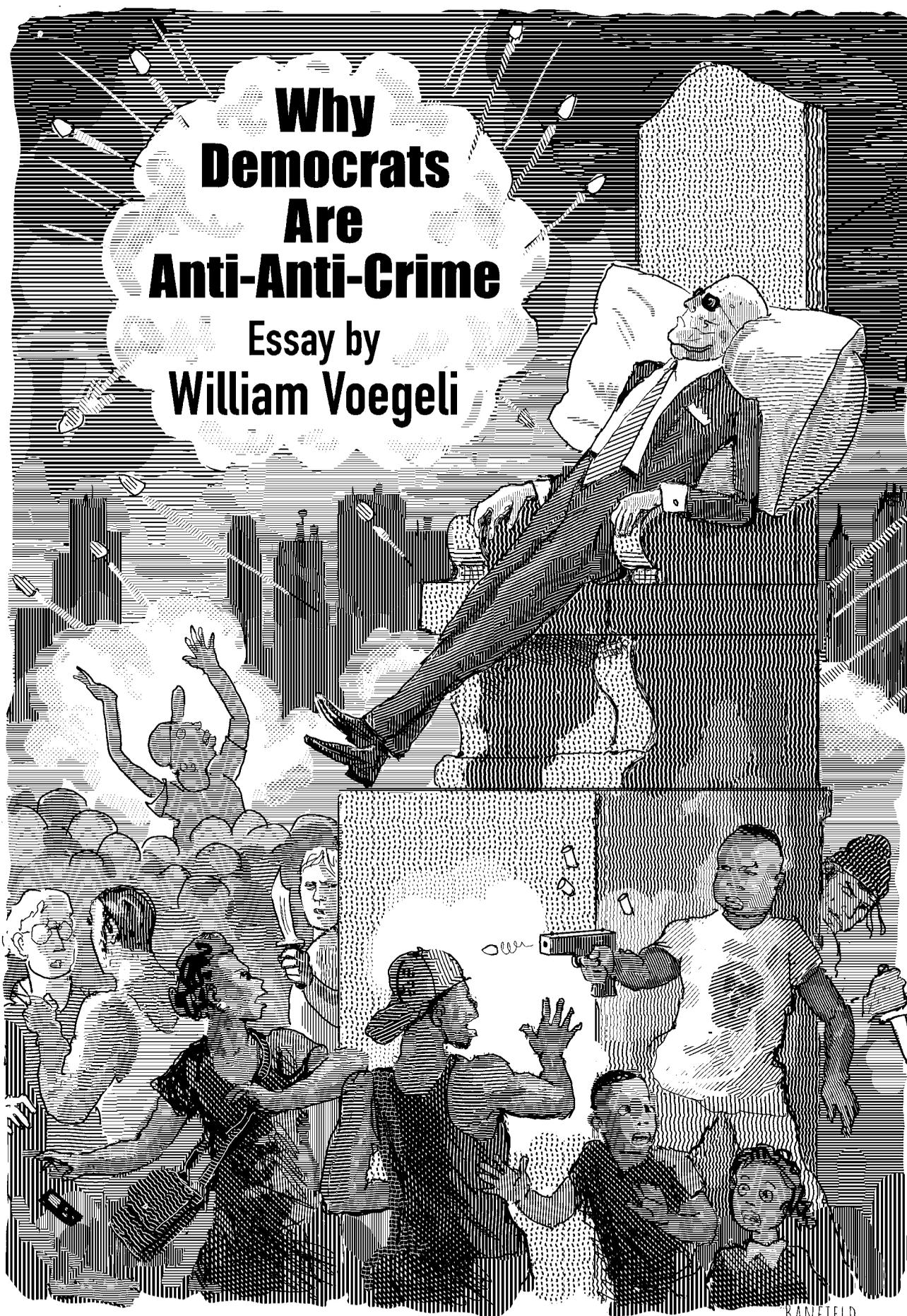
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Essay by Christopher Caldwell

LITTLE ITALY

Less populous, more populist.



WELL AFTER DARK ON AN EVENING in late May, almost silently, an anti-smuggling patrol ship from the Italian Guardia di Finanza approached a commercial pier on the Mediterranean island of Lampedusa. It was towing a little motorboat crowded with clandestine migrants, a couple dozen of them. Policemen, doctors, and van drivers, masked against coronavirus, bustled on the pier. NGO workers were there with legal advice and thermoses full of tea. Otherwise, no one witnessed the landing except two tipped-off journalists watching from the roof of a shed 100 yards away.

This happens a lot on Lampedusa. An unprepossessing shelf of scrub and dirt surrounded by turquoise shallows and popular beaches, the island is a lot closer to Africa than to Sicily. The boat had traveled 180 miles from Libya—either from the anarchic capital city of Tripoli or from the onetime resort of Zuwara, a bit west. Its passengers were from sub-Saharan Africa.

Usually small migrant craft like this one arrive from Tunisia, only 80 miles away. In calm seas a party of young North African men looking for work can make the trip on

the spur of the moment. Often Italian patrols don't even notice when they're dropped off. Most of the travelers from remotest Africa, by contrast, have made an arduous trek north through the Sahara to Tripoli, carrying their life savings, and possibly the life savings of everyone in their village. Taking that route is a real production, requiring fleets of trucks to manage the often trackless Sahara crossing, dosshouses en route, bribes to officials, and bigger boats, like the two fishing vessels, one of them loaded with 180 people, that had arrived earlier that day. It is a massive illegal business that leaves its mark on a dozen southern Italian ports, and there are days when 2,000 migrants arrive in Lampedusa alone. But the volume depends on many factors. The cast of migrants, North African and Italian mafias, North African militaries, billionaire-funded international rescue ships, and Italian and European Union policymakers, is constantly shifting.

Down on the Lampedusan pier, the arriving migrants are swaddled in gold-foil "thermic" jackets that medics have provided against the chilly Mediterranean night. After being tested for COVID, some will be

sent to a giant seven-story ferryboat docked a mile up the coast, rented by authorities and converted to a hospital/quarantine ship. Those who say they are unaccompanied minors are handled separately. Everyone else will be loaded into vans and sent to a holding center, known as a "hotspot."

The hotspot sits in a canyon at the center of the island, where a dusty road dead-ends. New arrivals are said to sleep on the ground there—it is hard to say definitively, because journalists aren't admitted. You can see why: apart from a substantial fishing fleet, tourism is the only economy Lampedusa has. Every time news networks show footage of famished, desiccated migrants scrambling off a beached speedboat, a certain number of tourists have second thoughts. Local anti-immigration protesters, led by Italy's League party, assemble on the pier irregularly. Last September, a large crowd tried to obstruct the debarkation of a boatful of migrants. By early this summer the hotspot was full, way past overflowing, and arriving migrants were being flown to Sicily, or to Puglia and Calabria on the Italian mainland. Convenient for them: there they can seek farm work of various legal and illegal



kinds and begin the process of establishing themselves in Italy; or they can head north, perhaps toward Italy's industrial cities, perhaps toward Austria, Germany, and France.

Lampedusa is a frontier. Bandits and contrabandists have favored it since antiquity. From here and from nearby Linosa the Allies began their reconquest of southern Europe in World War II. Lampedusa was a vital radar base during the Cold War. When, in April 1986, the United States bombed the Tripoli palace of Libyan strongman Muammar Gadhafi, having identified him as the author of a bomb attack on U.S. soldiers in Berlin, Gadhafi fired two Scud missiles back at Lampedusa. It was the part of the Free World that the Third World could reach. It still is, but lately the context has changed. Forward beachheads are a boon to strong countries and a bane to weak ones. Like the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla on the Moroccan coast, or like the Canary Islands, Lampedusa is a onetime projection of Western imperial strength that now serves more as an advertisement of Western akrasia. The scrubland alongside the old radar base is now used as a junkyard for seized migrant boats. The Sixth Fleet no longer lays down the law in surrounding waters. Turkey and Russia compete for influence in the eastern Mediterranean. Though lively in high season, Lampedusa is a place almost wholly without culture, where you cannot even buy a newspaper. Its vulnerability is advertised as much by a paucity of churches as by a paucity of forts. It is a ruin of sorts.

From Populous to Populist

UNTIL COVID HIT, IT SEEMED THE whole of Italian politics was about migration. It wasn't just the news of invaders, human traffickers, and bodies washed up on beaches that shocked people—it was also the policy challenges they signaled. The serial crises Italians have faced this century have all been, in their way, demographic ones. From their country's mid-19th-century unification until recently, producing children had rarely been a problem for Italians. Their poor lined up to work in the sulfur mines of Sicily and the tomato fields of Campania. Their cities overflowed into all the cities of the Mediterranean, from Marseille to Tangiers to Beirut. Italians filled the slums of New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and Buenos Aires. They staffed and built other people's African empires, notably France's, and starting in 1885 they launched their own poorly thought-out bids for imperial conquest.

But for two generations now, the Italian birth rate has been plummeting. By the end of this decade a majority of Italians will be older than 50, an age distribution unseen in any society in the history of the world. There are still about 60 million people in Italy, just as there were around 2010. But suddenly 5 million of them are foreigners, and that number is going nowhere but up. For many years in Italy, births and deaths kept pace at around half a million annually. Now, they've come out of whack. Italy has about 650,000 annual deaths and barely 400,000 annual births, meaning the loss of a quarter-million natives a year. In the COVID year 2020, deaths stood at almost 750,000. But that is not all, for emigration has not stopped. In recent years, Italy has been losing almost 200,000 of its citizens (including many from among its expensively educated elites) to migration, while more than 300,000 foreigners have come from abroad (although this latter number has been as high as 500,000 in some years).

A simpler way to put it is to say that every year, on balance, Italians "swap out," through migration and death, 800,000 or 900,000 native Italians, and "replace" them with a population of roughly equal size that is barely half Italian. We are still not through. Because internal migration—from Italy's relatively poor south to its new-economy hubs—has not stopped, either. The province of Enna, in Sicily, will lose a fifth of its population by mid-century. Over that time, the population of Africa, a few hours away by skiff, is going to double in size, adding 1.2 billion people. This is a recipe for an Italy that will look very different—and behave very differently—from one decade to the next. Americans might be comfortable with this kind of instability. Italians are not.

Population loss interacts dangerously with debt. In the past decade, Italy has arrived at debt levels far beyond what the most footloose political economists of yore considered responsible. An old rule of thumb holds that, once a country's debt matches its GDP, bankruptcy awaits, with all the knock-on consequences for national self-determination that that entails. In Italy's case, the bankruptcy is undeclared. Its debt has risen to 158% of GDP, outstripping even that of the Obama/Trump-era United States, where, by early 2021, debt stood at 128%. Biden-era budgets will bring the U.S. figure closer to Italian levels, but there are two differences that make Italy's predicament more severe. First, its working age population is shrinking even faster than its total population. (Workers are being replaced by mi-

grants to some extent, but at lower levels of productivity.) Second, Italy doesn't have its own currency. Because it belongs to the European Union and uses the Euro, it does not control its macro-economic policy. It cannot finesse its way out of debt the way it used to.

The global economy has its pluses and minuses for all countries. In Italy, minuses have predominated. Italy developed the habit in the 1960s of paying for an ever-lengthening menu of social benefits by printing money and devaluing its currency. It was to break this habit that Italy joined the European Monetary System (EMS), the precursor to the Euro, and split its central bank from its treasury. In retrospect, there turned out to be worse ways to finance a profligate welfare state than devaluation. Italy couldn't borrow at reasonable rates, and since joining the Euro it has steadily lost ground to those countries (above all, Germany) that can. Italy has run a tight budgetary ship since the 1980s but, as the Italian economist Thomas Fazi recently noted in *American Affairs* magazine, its debt has risen even as its deficits have fallen.

To be fair, Italy's leaders were not just trying to steer their country toward a more ruthless and dastardly variant of capitalism—they were trying to protect their system from the inroads being made by Communist movements, which by the late 1970s had turned violent. A year before Italy joined the EMS, the Red Brigades kidnapped Christian Democrat leader and former prime minister Aldo Moro, held him for 55 days, interrogated him, and killed him. Like many critics of Italian capitalism, Fazi doesn't sufficiently consider these *political* motivations for Italy's policy shift. But his economic conclusion is right. By election year 2018, those Italians who associated membership in the European Union with national impotence, out-of-control immigration, and economic calamity had become the most powerful voting bloc in the country.

In the wake of Brexit, Italy looked like the next E.U. domino to fall. The country had not one but two populist parties, and together they took half the country's votes. Banding together in the election's aftermath, they formed a parliamentary majority. On the so-called "left" there was the Five Star Movement, less than a decade old. Its founder: the comedian Beppe Grillo. Its decision-making system: Rousseau (not the philosopher but an online-voting software designed by one of Grillo's eccentric devotees). Its motto: Up yours! The Five Stars were dedicated to the proposition that the establishment parties—Silvio Berlusconi's center-right Forza Italia and the business-friendly center-left



Democrats under Matteo Renzi—could not be trusted. Those dinosaurs represented only a “caste” of oligarchical insiders.

The populist party of the Right, the League, had similar views. It had started off as the Northern League, a bunch of businessmen in the rich northern cities of the Po Valley complaining about the hicks, deadbeats, and mafiosi who controlled the south. Now, under Matteo Salvini, it turned into a national party focused on immigration.

The resulting coalition of misfits would be led by a novice, a hitherto-unknown law professor named Giuseppe Conte. It gave the Italian political class the fright of its life. Handsome, affable, intelligent, Conte had been a popular teacher. The public warmed to him. Occasionally backed from without by Berlusconi and the firebrand orator Giorgia Meloni (who led a nationalist party called Brothers of Italy), the government was enormously popular.

In a way, it was too popular. The anti-corruption Five Star movement had entered government with about twice as many seats as the anti-immigration League. But Salvini’s aggressive, all-fronts assault on the business of immigration sent the public into raptures. Angry bloggers and YouTubers now got a hearing. They had argued that the dozen or

so foundation-backed and church-backed rescue boats operating south of Italy were not rescue boats at all. By any normal definition of the word “rescue” this was correct. Marine tracking data, readily available on the internet, showed those boats plying a predictable route between the African coast and Italian ports, picking up migrants at what looked suspiciously like rendezvous points. This certainly made migration safer. But it also encouraged it. Salvini pushed for—and won passage of—laws that made the encouragement of illegal migration a crime. They are still on the books. Eventually the wholly independent and highly politicized Italian judiciary swung into action to thwart him. Citing two occasions when migrants had been forbidden to disembark from rescue boats, the judges prosecuted Salvini for *kidnapping*. This only increased his popularity. By summer 2019, polls showed that Salvini’s League would take almost 40% of the vote if elections were called, possibly enough to give it sole control of government, but certainly enough to make Salvini prime minister at the head of a mighty coalition. He spent that August campaigning in a Speedo on Italy’s beaches and began looking for a pretext to dissolve the government.

The popularity of the Five Star Movement, meanwhile, was steadily ebbing. But

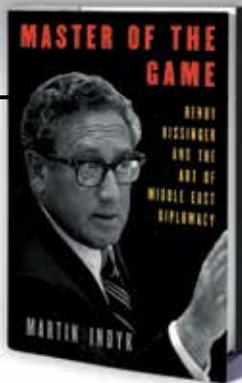
they still had all those seats won in 2018. Maybe it didn’t occur to Salvini that, under changed circumstances, the Five Stars might find common cause with the party they had been founded to oppose, the center-left Democrats. But that is what happened. Salvini had blundered. Suddenly a government mixing populists of the Left and populists of the Right had been replaced by a government mixing elitists of the Left and populists of the Left.

Technical Government

NONE OF THIS STOPPED SALVINI FROM being the most popular politician in the country. Nor did the bout of jitters on financial markets that soon followed. As interest rates rose, Salvini threw down a marker. He said that, should it become necessary for the European Union to rescue Italian financial markets, recourse to the European Stability Mechanism (ESM) would be unacceptable. Brussels had designed the ESM system in 2012, at a time when several European countries were on the brink of insolvency. E.U. auditors supervised the financing of heavily indebted Greece in exchange for the virtual extinction of the country’s budgetary and political sovereignty. In hindsight, it was

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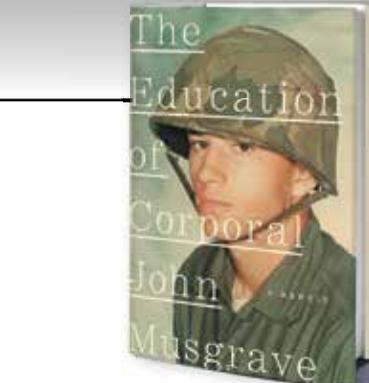
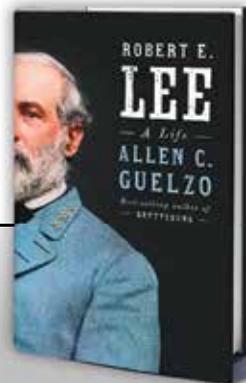


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a ruse. For the sake of protecting the Euro, the E.U. needed Greece to remain solvent—probably more than Greece itself did. Italians had reason to follow such matters closely and Salvini’s hard line received a resounding affirmation from the public.

That was how things stood in February 2020 when a hospital in Codogno, near Milan, reported that a gravely ill man had become the first Westerner to test positive for the new coronavirus that had been killing people in China. Within days the Italian economy was idle, and pressure on the country’s finances began to mount. Conte was in a strong position to argue that Europe should offer Italy an unconditional bailout of some sort. In July he seemed to receive it: the E.U. would raise €750 billion for a “recovery” package, of which Italy would get almost a third (€209 billion).

The English word “lockdown” was imported into Italian. Italy’s version was, by Western standards, punitive—parks closed, jogging and dog-walking discouraged, disciplining of supermarkets if they sold the non-essential products they normally kept on their shelves. The most important effect of the lockdown was probably that it shifted political negotiations of all kinds into informally arranged Zoom meetings, away from public view. In these meetings, Italy’s establishment began to

worry. This massive infusion of outside investment—not only unprecedented but probably the last one Italy would ever receive, given its demographic decline and its waning creditworthiness—was about to be squandered by the rednecks in charge of the parliament.

So in the first weeks of 2021, Matteo Renzi, ex-prime minister and leader of the business-friendly wing of the progressive Democrats, withdrew support for the government. Another ex-premier, Massimo D’Alema, described the maneuver as one to “get rid of the country’s most popular man [Conte] at the will of the most unpopular [Renzi].” What permitted the maneuver in the first place was the logistical impossibility of going to the polls during a pandemic, which normally would have brought the risk of big gains for the still-formidable Salvini and the rising hardliner Giorgia Meloni. With the connivance of President Sergio Mattarella, a “technical” government was brought to power. Leading it was Mario Draghi, a former Goldman Sachs investment banker and head of the European Central Bank. Draghi was widely credited with having “saved the Euro” a decade before, through a combination of well-designed austerity plans and a bold promise that he would do “whatever it takes”—including bending E.U.

rules against monetizing debt—to defend the Euro against speculative attacks. This was not usually a formula for success in Italian politics, but Draghi’s rise came at a moment when the country’s parties were afraid of seeming to look a gift horse in the mouth. All of them backed Draghi, with the exception of Meloni’s Brothers of Italy.

The bailout only *seemed* unconditional. Most of this vast pool of money came already earmarked by the E.U.’s anti-populist technocrats—37% of it for green-energy programs, 21% for cyber-infrastructure. Under Draghi, Italy’s own aid programs came to include funding for ensuring gender equity in executive promotions. June saw the introduction of a new European Public Prosecutor’s Office, tasked with monitoring any irregularities in Recovery Fund spending. Countries that could opt out of it did—Denmark, Hungary, Ireland, Poland, and Sweden. But Euroskeptic Italy had now been locked into Europe’s multinational structures through debt. By early summer 2021, the Italian establishment seemed to have recovered its confidence, for the first time since 2018. The main topic of discussion in the mainstream dailies was whether Draghi should seek re-election as prime minister in 2023 or begin his transition to the presidency (a once-ceremonial position

New and Noteworthy Books from AEI Scholars

Uncontrolled Spread

Why COVID-19 Crushed Us and How We Can Defeat the Next Pandemic

Scott Gottlieb

September 21, 2021

Publisher: Harper

ISBN: 978-0063080010

Has America’s COVID-19 catastrophe taught us anything? In *Uncontrolled Spread*, physician and former Food and Drug

Administration Commissioner Scott Gottlieb shows how COVID-19 trounced America’s pandemic preparations and outlines the steps that must be taken to protect against the next outbreak. He provides an inside account of how level after level of American government crumbled as the COVID-19 crisis advanced. *Uncontrolled Spread* argues we must fix our systems and prepare for a deadlier coronavirus variant, a flu pandemic, or whatever else nature may threaten us with.



No Way to Treat a Child

How the Foster Care System, Family Courts, and Racial Activists Are Wrecking Young Lives

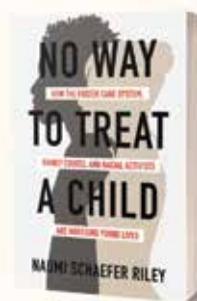
Naomi Schaefer Riley

October 5, 2021

Publisher: Bombardier Books

ISBN: 978-1642936575

The American child welfare system is bent toward protecting adults, not children. Kids in danger are treated instrumentally to promote the rehabilitation of their parents, the welfare of their communities, and the social justice of their race and tribe—and inevitably their most precious developmental years are lost in bureaucratic and judicial red tape. It is time to start focusing on the most important question: Where are the emotionally and financially stable, loving, and permanent homes where these kids can thrive?



The Poor Side of Town And Why We Need It

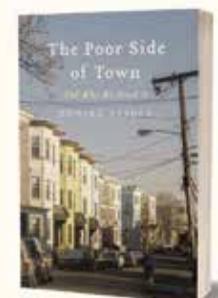
Howard Husock

September 21, 2021

Publisher: Encounter Books

ISBN: 978-1641772020

This book combines a critique of more than a century of housing reform policies with the idea that simple low-cost housing—a poor side of town—helps those of modest means build financial assets and join in the local democratic process. The book tells the stories of Jacob Riis, Lawrence Veiller, Jane Jacobs, William Levitt, and Rev. Johnny Ray Youngblood, and it includes first-person accounts of onetime residents who lost their homes and businesses to housing reform and urban renewal. This is a book with important policy implications—built on powerful, personal stories.



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that has lately taken on certain monarchical prerogatives) a year earlier.

It was a curious configuration: an anti-establishment government (elected in a populist fury against elite high-handedness) gave way to an establishment government (brought to power by elite worries about populist incompetence). A parliament elected to do one thing had done the diametrical opposite. This kind of *trasformismo*, as it is called, has been a specialty of Italian politics since the 1870s. Some irresistible force—it can be cultural or religious or criminal, but is most often economic—creates a context in which the official constitutional relationship between voters and their elected representatives is relativized, contextualized, subordinated to some larger system of considerations. The genius of modern Italian political thought, from Machiavelli to Giambattista Vico to Vilfredo Pareto to Antonio Gramsci to Toni Negri, has often been a matter of identifying the systemic logic of extra-constitutional power, and putting it to work against the constitutional system. It has swept the world. American politics, for example, has grown notably more Italian.

Of course, you can't do this kind of maneuvering forever. In May it was announced that illegal migrant landings in the south of Italy had tripled this year. Salvini warned that the southern border was leaking "like a sieve" and called his followers into the street in Rome. But it is tough to protest the government when you are part of it. By this time Giorgia Meloni, alone in opposition, was vying with Salvini as the most popular conservative politician in the country. Her autobiography, published in the spring, had spent several weeks atop the national bestseller lists.

The New Southern Question

AS IT GROWS IN SCALE, IMMIGRATION to the Italian south looks less like a cultural threat hatched in the populist imagination and more like a security threat of a fairly classic kind. The Mediterranean is no longer the tactical chessboard of the Western powers that it was from the 16th-century Battle of Lepanto until the end of the Cold War. It is once again a civilizational frontier vulnerable to being breached. Lombards and Piedmontese complain about the "African" or "Middle Eastern" ways of the Italian south, as if they were some kind of foolish lifestyle choice. But that is wrong. Non-Christian cultures and non-Western folkways are just part of the neighborhood. Maglie, the Apulian hometown of the martyred prime minister

Aldo Moro, is closer to Istanbul than it is to Milan, just as Milan is closer to London (in spirit as well as distance) than to the docks in Lampedusa where migrants are making landfall. Italy's need to bridge these different worlds has been the perennial challenge to its unity. Now it has become a basic challenge to the unity of the European Union.

There are continuities. The four telamons that hold up the Porta Nuova in Palermo—exotic, Middle-Eastern-looking figures with mustachios and turbans—were put there to commemorate the conquest of Tunis (and the memory of the conquest of Tripoli) by Charles V. Italy wrested control of Tripoli from the Ottomans in 1911 and held it until World War II. Now the Turks, with their half-million-man army, bigger than any in Western Europe, are back. The Turkey-friendly Islamist party Ennahda has controlled Tunisia since the 2011 elections and much of the Libyan coast is under Turkish control or influence. In 2015, when hundreds of thousands of Syrian migrants streamed across Asia Minor into Europe, Germany's

The Mediterranean is once again a civilizational frontier, vulnerable to being breached.

Angela Merkel rejected the urging of certain nationalist politicians that she use force to repel migrants at the border. Hundreds of thousands more joined the march, coming from across the Middle East and Asia. The crisis did not end until Merkel negotiated a deal on behalf of the European Union that quietly pays Turkey a large sum, reportedly €3 billion a year, to dam the flow at its own border. She did not thereby answer the force question. She merely subcontracted it to a government traditional enough to confront it squarely. Italy's government does something similar by paying Libyan coast guard forces to police the Tripolitanian shore for migrant boats.

Libya is the site of the greatest strategic reversal for Europe since the Cold War—a self-inflicted one. In 2011, French president Nicolas Sarkozy and British prime minister David Cameron enlisted the Obama Administration in a campaign of naval and aerial bombardment to topple Libyan strongman Muammar Gaddafi, who had ruled the country for four decades. In their view it was common decency they were fighting for,

a defense of the Libyan opposition's human rights against blustering threats broadcast by Gaddafi on Libyan radio and relayed to Sarkozy by the celebrity philosophe Bernard-Henri Lévy. Silvio Berlusconi, who had made stable relations with Gaddafi a priority of Italian foreign policy, was persuaded to reverse course. Only Angela Merkel warned that the Western intervention would be imprudent. She was mocked. But she was right. The operation resulted in the gangland murder of Gaddafi and two of his sons. After a decade no stable government has emerged to replace the one toppled. A vital stretch of Mediterranean coastline, mostly quiescent since the Cold War, turned into what cooler heads had always warned it had the potential to be: a highway of crime, drugs, arms, and mass migration sowing problems on two continents.

Italy is living a contemporary version of what used to be called the "southern question." If one divides the country in two at Rome, it contains one nation to the north of more than 30 million people that is as rich and sophisticated as any in Europe—and another in the south with upwards of 20 million people and chronically low employment. A dramatic widening of inequality between the northern centers of Italian finance and the southern centers of agriculture opened up around 1860. The south believes the north has siphoned off its capital. The north boasts that it has rescued the south from its destiny of underdevelopment. The gap closed somewhat in the 20th century, but this required considerable southward transfers from the central government. Since these transfers were unpopular, they needed to be disguised with the tricks made possible by a flexible currency, something Italy no longer has. The northward flight of Italian manpower continues.

What can be done to arrest it? Benito Mussolini's regime made demographics a priority and introduced financial incentives. Bachelors were taxed, and fathers of six children or more lived tax-free. But those policies were discredited in Italy by the calamities of fascism. In the half-century after the 1960s, the state built decent highways to the south, but northern goods and northern consumerism have proved easier to spread than northern industry. There have been some hopes in the last year that the south could be rejuvenated through what was called "southworking"—as long as young professionals were meeting via Zoom, they could pocket the savings on rent and eat their mother's caponata or 'nduja into the bargain. But that arrangement is unlikely to survive COVID and the lockdowns.



Solutions to the southern population crisis have mostly focused on gimmicks. The scenic cliffside village of Pentedattilo in Calabria has been reclaimed by artists for studios, but only a handful of people still inhabit the place. You will see a “For Sale” sign or two there. The offer by certain villages of old houses for €1 each to any foreigner wealthy and willing enough to fix them up seems to have fired the romantic imagination of Italo-philes. But these houses, scenic though they are, are not worth much more than €1. Many are in places where there has never been indoor plumbing. Other “houses” have collapsed into their constituent stones.

The more likely long-term outcome is that Italy will be repopulated by its immigrants. In the adjacent Calabrian towns of Riace and Camini, newcomers from Africa and the Middle East have settled in abandoned houses and even taken up some of the old village crafts, thanks to massive subsidies from churches and the charitable “third sector.” These have made the two towns something of a showcase. It is hard to see how such programs could be scaled up to a national level. On the other hand there are 200,000 third-sector charities in Italy. Many sizable southern towns are taking on a wholly immigrant identity, such as the dysfunctional former beach resort of Castel Volturno, north of Naples, which is now majority Nigerian and Ghanaian.

Italian immigration policy, apart from the brief Salvini interlude, has had something in common with the American one. It has escaped the control of the legislative parts of government, and tends to address the fallout from problems, not the problems themselves. As the European Union has grown in

its pretensions, Italy has lost its free hand on immigration policy. The assumption that its old responsibilities would be discharged by new entities has proved mistaken. Apparently there is no law of conservation of sovereignty. A country can lose its sovereignty without someone else picking it up.

Draghi has promised to seek a fairer sharing of migrants among E.U. partners. But the Visegrád Group of central European countries (Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia) has refused to take any migrants at all. Various iterations of the short-sighted “Dublin regulation” on migration—which assign policymaking authority to the E.U. and financial responsibility to the first country where the migrants land—have been suspended during COVID, but they are still the law. Austria has sent armored units to its border with Italy to block migrants, and French police have taken pregnant migrant women off trains headed from Italy into France. If all of Italy’s migrants became “trapped” within its borders, the resulting outburst of populism would likely exceed anything seen in Europe to date.

Europe’s often-stated aspiration is to render more stable and prosperous the countries from which immigrants come. Draghi has discussed with Angela Merkel the need for bilateral agreements with Mali, Ethiopia, and Eritrea. His idea is widely shared, but it is both vague and misguided. Europe can certainly send resources to Africa. But what is driving migration is an increase in population, not an increase in poverty. From Paul Collier to Stephen Smith, the most knowledgeable students of northward migration have concluded that migrants migrate because, despite all the

difficulties and dangers involved, it is a relatively safe bet to produce a windfall change in one’s standard of living. For the time being, the most rational way for Africans to use fresh economic resources is to invest them in migration. Aid and growth mean more people will leave, not fewer.

If Draghi has been hesitant in addressing questions of demography and migration and their impact on the most important issues facing Italy, he is not alone. This century, Italian politicians have preferred to lecture their voters about building the European Union, seemingly oblivious to the E.U.’s disappointments and failures. That obliviousness has been the main reason for populism’s rise in various guises. Populism remains the country’s strongest political force, even if a combination of European Union money and skillful parliamentary maneuvering has, for now, managed to put a lid on it.

On the most pressing issues, keeping Italians unified still requires considerable national resolve. Membership in the European Union makes this difficult. So Italy—culturally central, geographically and ideologically eccentric—has again become a standing puzzle for the West. In the closing years of the Cold War, its large Communist party and radicalized youth put Europe at risk of having its unity shattered from the east. Today its long frontier and bifurcated society put Europe at risk of having its unity shattered from the south.

Christopher Caldwell is a contributing editor of the Claremont Review of Books and the author, most recently, of The Age of Entitlement: America Since the Sixties (Simon & Schuster).

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