

## Not an Oxymoron: Italy and Good Government

Filippo Sabetti, *The Search for Good Government: Understanding the Paradox of Italian Democracy*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002.

Review by Hugh Segal



The word Italy evokes many largely warm, images...hospitality...sophistication...family...history...culture...opera...cuisine...fashion...architecture...to name a few. But “good government” does not immediately spring to mind. Which is precisely why Filippo Sabetti’s book *The Search for Good Government: Understanding the Paradox of Italian Democracy* is so important. And the nature of Sabetti’s scholarly and reflective work reaches far beyond the intricacies of the search for good government in Italy. It embraces core issues about morality, democracy, social norms and political culture all students and supporters of democracy might well consider.

In this wide-ranging but carefully written analysis, Sabetti not only explores what has happened to democracy and governance in Italy in the postwar years, but contextualizes this study with a strong and comparative historical overlay. Sabetti also challenges, with both flair and rare insight, some of the guiding principles of Robert Putnam’s *Marking Democracy Work* (1993) relative to the differences between northern and

southern Italy and respective attitudes to governance.

In tracing the evolution of the Italian state through the customs union debates to the case for a Federal Union, the 1848 revolts, and the centralization and decentralization debates in the late 1800s, Sabetti notes the influence of concurrent and indigenous democratic and related developments in Sicily, the Swedish-

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Norwegian system, the French, Scottish and American systems, and learned intellectual engagement by the creators of the Italian state as to the relative merits of each in terms of Italy’s needs.

The creation of the Italian state, and the rejection of decentralist options through the Law on

Administrative Unification of March 1865, did put unity at the centre of the plan. But, as Sabetti points out, it was Luigi Einaudi, a political economist from Piedmont who went on to be a governor of the Bank of Italy, who allowed that while they were opting in their own minds for liberty and democracy, those who framed the centralized state were unwittingly laying in the state infrastructure that would

be instrumental in the later dictatorship.

In this part of the analysis, as well as in his sections on the constitutional design that did not happen, the role of central planning, and the effects of the anti-Mafia engagement as a proxy for the search for good government, Sabetti reaches out to embrace social, economic and politi-

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cal mainstreams to explore where their points of confluence produce opportunities for government reform, institution-building and various viragoes in one direction or another. This is no sterile political science reader. Nor is it a tiresome collation of governmental theories and political science. It is a fulsome and interdisciplinary analysis written in reader-friendly prose that makes both the underlying analytical themes and the core insights more than accessible.

In his final chapters, where he confronts Putnam's use of "path dependent" analysis to explain governance realities in Italy (path dependency argues that it is very hard for societies to break out of paths established by the weight of past cultural, political, religious and historic

momentum), Sabetti exposes the reader to a carefully articulated and highly refined argument about the way in which change happens in political reality, how the forces of the past matter, and the importance of understanding how these forces interact with present reality to produce opportunities for change.

He does nothing so inelegant as dismiss Putnam's watershed work. Rather, he chooses to contextualize its relevance and proscribe limitations on its application in a fashion that advances the reader's understanding of the core issues around culture and democracy, not to mention the interaction with civil society that sheds light on democracy as a whole, not just the intricacies of Italian democracy as such.

While economics is called the dismal science, students of political theory know that some scholars can be not only impenetrable but often obscure and disengaged in their writing, to the point of causing immense cognitive frustration for the reader. Sabetti gives political science scholarship a much better name with this work. His book invites the reader to think laterally about a host of forces that produce good and bad government. It engages the theories of others and does so with care and scholarly inquiry. It builds an analytical case about Italian democracy that clearly suggests compelling lines of inquiry for democracies elsewhere, especially those smug about their alleged excellence. It ties culture, history, choice, economics, sociology, external influence and political pragmatism into a rich fibre of constructive insights that not only connect up, but allow a cogent and easily embraced conclusion to be understood and appreciated. It is a book well worth reading.

*Hugh Segal is President of the Institute for Research on Public Policy and author of In Defence of Civility.*

**The Review of Economic Performance and Social Progress 2002** Following intense debates over free trade in the 1980s and the fiscal crisis in the 1990s, the focus of concern in the policy world has shifted in recent years to the widening productivity gap between Canada and the United States. Business leaders, government officials and media commentators have sounded alarms about the productivity gap and have engaged in vigorous debates about the causes of the problem and the best policy responses. Advocates have advanced their favourite culprits, with regulatory inefficiencies, innovation lags, relative tax burden and weak entrepreneurialism often cited, usually without much evidence. The wider Canadian public seems to regard the debate with a large dose of scepticism and perhaps concern about the implications of the productivity agenda for labour market prospects and potential tradeoffs between social and economic objectives.

Part of the difficulty, in our view, is that the productivity debate in Canada has traditionally focused on narrow economic issues. It has given inadequate attention to the broader ramifications of productivity, not just for our material standard of living but also for the choices we make collectively to enhance our social well-being. The debate has also paid too little attention to the social determinants of productivity—that is, to the feedback mechanisms running from social conditions and factors to productivity growth.

The objective of this second issue of *The Review of Economic Performance and Social Progress* is to fill, at least in part, the parallel lacuna in the research literature in Canada. As in the public debates, most research focuses on one side of the duality, emphasizing the impact of productivity growth on the standard of living of citizens. Much less attention is paid to the impact of social conditions on productivity. However, economic factors alone cannot explain differences in the growth rates and productivity levels of countries around the world, and a comprehensive understanding needs to incorporate institutional and social factors. A country's basic human and social resources are important to its economy. The levels of education and health of its citizens, the demographic profile of its population, the strength of the social networks that link people, the level of inequality among individuals and families, and the effectiveness of its institutions may all have important implications for a country's economic performance. In short, people and society matter.

*Andrew Sharpe, France St-Hilaire and Keith Banting (eds), p. 1*