

Garbage, Gypsies, "Gamorra", Girls and Gays: Waiting for Mr. Berlusconi

Judith Harris (May 20, 2008)



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NAPLES - Not since the 1970's and the Years of Lead has Italian society been confronted with such an onslaught of problems, all at the same time, and all on ghastly display here in Naples, where neo-Premier Silvio Berlusconi and his ministers will hold their very first cabinet meeting Wednesday.

Will the cabinet see any of these problems and, if so, will they care to look? Berlusconi will fly in and then be whisked through downtown Naples to the Prefettura building, which houses the chief of police. To make sure he can actually get there, rubbish collectors worked feverishly through blustery storms and heavy rain today, to clear a way through the garbage pile-ups. The point was less to



spare the Premier and his ministers the unsightly mess that is Naples these days than to ensure that the official cortege can pass on the roads. The heavy rain helped by putting out the multitude of garbage fires set by angry citizens, who have been throwing stones at the firemen who plough through the garbage-strewn streets to try to put out these fires, dangerous because they release dioxin into the air.

I would have liked Mr. Berlusconi to have been bundled into a car riding on the Vesuvius road yesterday, where other irate citizens had, like the French at the Bastille, built a mountainous roadblock to draw attention to their plight, but made of garbage rather than sticks and paving stones. Or perhaps Mr. Berlusconi could have walked a couple of miles with me around the outlying town of Castellamare di Stabia. Every 15 or so yards garbage of all kinds was piled up to eye level, and fear of rats together with the noxious stink of both ripe and burning rubbish—undifferentiated medicine containers, plastic bottles, used diapers, tin cans, household waste—obliged walking in the streets, at risk of being run down. The financial loss to the Neapolitan tourism industry is horrendous, with hotel cancellations the order of the day. Health concerns are growing, with doctors issuing warnings, and the U.S. officials tracking an unusual rise in illness among American military based here.

To be helpful, today's *Il Mattino*, a Neapolitan daily, offers hints to help the public deal with today's 5,000 tons of piled-up rubbish:

- Children are not to play in the streets and should wash hands and remove their shoes upon entering their homes.
- Pregnant women are to take special care as the dioxin released from the burning rubbish piles can cause deformed fetuses.
- The elderly, who are unsteady on their feet, would do well to stay home altogether so as not to slip.

In addition, a call center has been created.

What has not been created is a solution to the problem, nor is anyone teaching the Neapolitans how to reduce the amount of garbage they produce daily. Everyone is blaming everyone else, and the Neapolitan mayor Rosa Russo Jervolino is on record saying, "I will do anything I can to help except to be a scapegoat." She has hinted that one planned toxic waste disposal plant is being sabotaged by investors wanting to construct a vast apartment building complex on that very site, which is all too possible.

After garbage comes the no less tractable problem of the gypsies, or Roma people, as they are correctly known. The influx of Romanian-born Roma has brought an upsurge of pitiful child beggars, violent rapes and household thefts attributed to Roma. Yesterday in Naples a European Union inspector toured a Roma (gypsy) camp, which she described as worse than any seen in Albania. The situation was aggravated in Naples after a 16-year-old girl broke into a Neapolitan apartment building and apparently tried to make off with a baby, perhaps to ask a ransom payment. The young Roma was nearly lynched, and her fellow Roma, blamed collectively, now live in terror of self-appointed punishment squads who continue with fire bombings and other harassments of those living in the Roma camps. Even in Rome itself, frightened Roma have organized night vigilantes squads to watch for fire bombers.

After garbage and gypsies comes problem number three, the Gamorra, as everyone now calls it since publication of Roberto Saviano's book on the Camorra. The Camorra-style murders continue, and yesterday an industrialist who presumably declined to pay the pizzo (protection) was gunned down. TV security cameras installed at considerable expense might have shown the killers, but had never been switched on; whether by ineptitude or by intention is unknown. Saviano lives under permanent police escort, thanks to writing a best-seller translated into 42 languages and, now, a film acclaimed at Cannes.

Let's turn the clock back just two years to the family-friendly government of Romano Prodi, then in Berlusconi's shoes as neo-Premier. Prodi represented a heterodox Center-left coalition ranging from Roman Catholics to reborn Communists, and his listing the ying-yang of future government projects included these: a family-gearred tax policy, but at the same time legal recognition of gay



partnerships; tax breaks for young couples trying to buy a home, but at the same time fiscal responsibility and the shoring up of Italy's indebtedness. Oh, yes, and there was the doubling of the number of day-care centers for the very young.

Looking back, such a modest program seems a pipe dream, all cuddly and comfy—a lost reverie, akin to Mr. Blandings getting his dream house. As we know, Prodi and these modest plans, which totally ignored the gigantic problems looming ahead, were wiped out in less than twenty-four months by what Umberto Eco laconically called “friendly fire” from his sniper-allies.

Further to the Camorra front, a rather striking woman has been arrested in the Secondigliano quarter in Naples by alert police, who noticed that, hanging on a wash line of an apartment balcony was attractive girlie lingerie. Checking housing titles, they discovered the flat belonged to an old geezer: what was that fancy lingerie doing on his wash line? And indeed further in-depth investigation revealed that Ms. Fortuna Liguori was in that flat, consorting with and cooking for a notorious boss named Paolo Di Lauro, implicated in a battle between his own Di Lauro clan and a splinter group whose vendetta killings left 56 corpses.

Funny as it all is, there is nothing, but nothing, funny about this situation.

Our fourth reality check continues with girls. The new cabinet includes four young ladies, so to speak, including three who are particularly fetching and one with—as the boys down at Remo's Café put it when the workmen and cops gathered around their photo—unfortunate thighs. “Chick mins,” these lady ministers are being called, and on the day his government sought its first vote of confidence Berlusconi sent one pretty lass a note saying that, if she had a date (“appuntamento galante,” was his arch term), she had his permission not to hang around just for a silly old vote of confidence. So much for respect for the institutions of government.

Yesterday one of these same chick mins, the prettiest, Mara Carfagna, Minister for Equal Opportunity, made a major pronouncement on the issue of the annual gay pride parade in Rome. This has been one big bone of contention (no pun intended) because Rome's new mayor Gianni Alemanno had announced that he wanted no show-off, boisterous, unseemly, colorful parade. Yesterday Carfagna chimed in finally, saying that the parade was not even necessary since there is no discrimination against gays.

If the most photographed and most reported new minister says it's true, it just may be. But there may be room for doubt.

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