

With politics, people

judith harris (August 06, 2014)



Politics grab the headlines, but politics are about people and their day-to-day concerns. So, for a summer's day change of pace, here are a few of the issues that are troubling—and delighting—Italians today. Among these events: the discovery of an ancient Roman laundry just underground near Piazza Venezia, rare “painted” puppies born in the Rome zoo, the disastrous swap of test tubes at a public hospital, the death of L’Unita’ and—why not—a snippet of unconfirmed but titillating gossip.

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ITEM: Down at the Crypta Balbi, a museum near Largo Argentina, archaeologists have just uncovered both an ancient temple with an arched altar devoted to various divinities, as well as an ancient laundry or, in Latin, a "fullonica." The temple findings suggest it was devoted probably to such Greek divinities as Artemis, Aphrodite, and Dionysos (whose mask was found), but also to Isis, imported from Egypt. Like the temple, the laundry, replete with a series of basins for washing togas, was in use during the 2d and perhaps the 3d Centuries AD; next to it was a latrine, perhaps because urine, containing ammonia, was used for cleaning clothes. According to archeologist Laura Vendittelli, museum director, "The fullonica is the first evidence of a commercial property dating from the empirical era in this neighborhood." The discoveries were made in April 2013 and the excavation just completed. Visitors can tour the newly discovered area. The Crypta, by the way, was a portico built by the "condottiero" Cornelius Balbus in 13 BC on the side of a theater.

ITEM: The country is going to the dogs! In June two African wild dogs gave birth in the Rome Zoo, renamed the Bioparco of Rome. Painted dogs, as they are usually called, have been in the zoo since 1982 and the zoo keepers are proud to report that Rome's is one of the few in Europe in which various litters of this endangered species have been born. The whole pack tends the pups, chewing food and then passing it into their mouths.

ITEM: In a disastrous error Dec. 13 in the public Pertini Hospital, two test tubes were swapped, with the result that a two fertilized embryos were implanted into the womb of the wrong woman, who will shortly give birth to twins. The genetic parents are asking \$1.35 million damages and also hope to have the babies, once born, handed over to them. The Lazio Region appealed to the National Bioethic Committee (CNB) for an opinion. On July 12, after a month of study and debate, the CNB responded that, at this point, it is impossible to determine who is the real mother, genetic or generating, but that the children must be able to count upon parents, whoever they are, and must whatever the outcome be told the truth at the appropriate time. Accompanying this is the committee's recommendation that the warring couples work it out in what is an ethical, religious and very human modern problem, with no simple, self-evident solution. In a quickie survey a Roman newspaper reported that 55% of those voting said that the generating mother was to keep them, 45% the biological mother. DNA exams supposedly proved the error, but while some express doubts, on July 30 the Rome prosecutors archived the case because no criminal act was involved.

ITEM: The Communist daily L'Unita' is deeply in debt (some say to the amount of over \$3 million) and published its final edition July 31, under a headline that it promised to return. Left-leaning nostalgics were deeply troubled when the paper ran its final headline: "L'Unita' e' viva" (L'Unita' is alive); the previous day had been a sorrowing mega-headline and, inside, blank pages. The newspaper had been founded by Antonio Gramsci in 1924, not long before Benito Mussolini shoved his way into power. The paper was the organ of the Partito Comunista Italiano (PCI), which, with a quarter of the Italian electorate in the postwar years, was the most influential leftist party in Europe at that time. In the Sixties it sold 280,000 copies daily; recent sales have slumped to barely 20,000 copies. Recently the Berlusconi passionaria Daniela Santanche had threatened to buy it, to which the editorial response was: Better dead than Santanche. A move is underway to find help from the middle-of-the-road, vaguely left-leading Premier Matteo Renzi's Partito Democratico (PD). The editorial comment from the rival daily "Il Fatto Quotidiano" was that "L'Unita' was more than a newspaper, it was a distinctive sign of belonging..." For Beppe Grillo, this was good news because the paper was "fascist" and had enjoyed overly large government subsidies.

ITEM: Now, vulgar gossip. Supposedly Silvio Berlusconi, the 78-year-old former premier, and his partner from Naples, Francesca Pascale, who celebrated her 29th birthday, are quarreling. The rumor is that he and others in the reconstituted Forza Italia were not pleased at Francesca's joining the gay rights association, and that, when Silvio was cleared of wrong-doing in the Ruby Heart-breaker affair, he seems to have decided to clean up his household affairs; reportedly she has personal political ambitions in Naples, which happens to be how the two met, when she headed a pro-Silvio committee. Francesca has formally denied any crisis with her "fiancee," as they describe each other; and in an interview with the pop magazine Oggi Silvio himself said that it is true that she had passed a difficult time, but that it is over.



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