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BOOKS OF THE TIMES

An Insider Explains Italy, Land of Cheery Dysfunction

By [WILLIAM GRIMES](#)

In [Italy](#), red lights come in many varieties. A rare few actually mean stop. Others, to the Italian driver, suggest different interpretations. At a pedestrian crossing at 7 a.m., with no pedestrians around, it is a “negotiable red,” more like a weak orange. At a traffic intersection, red could mean what the Florentines call rosso pieno, or full red, but it might, with no cars coming, be more of a suggestion than a command. It all depends.

The red-light mentality, as the journalist Beppe Severgnini sees it, explains volumes about Italy and the Italians. “We think it’s an insult to our intelligence to comply with a regulation,” he writes in “La Bella Figura,” his witty, insightful tour of the Italian mind. “Obedience is boring. We want to think about it. We want to decide whether a particular law applies to our specific case. In that place, at that time.”

This principle applies to traffic regulations, taxes, solemn laws and personal behavior. Everything is personal and open to discussion. As a result, Italy totters along in a state of amiable chaos, its situation desperate but not serious, which is more or less the way Italians like it, those in charge and those, in principle, being led. “Controllers and controlled have an unspoken agreement,” Mr. Severgnini writes. “You don’t change, we don’t change, and Italy doesn’t change, but we all complain that we can’t go on like this.”

Mr. Severgnini, a columnist for the Milan newspaper Corriere della Sera, turned a fond eye on the United States in his last book, “Ciao, America!,” but this time around, on his home turf, he bites harder and deeper. The paradoxes of Italian life engage him. They bring out the reflective wit that, he argues, is native to most Italians and may be their most potent weapon in the struggle with bureaucracy and social dysfunction. Intertwined with native wit is a strong sense of self-esteem enjoyed by even the humblest Italian, as well as a fatal weakness for beauty and surface appeal, “la bella figura.”

Italians, in other words, would just as soon look good as be good. The country suffers from an ethics deficit, most clearly visible in the attitude toward taxes. Lying outrageously about one’s income is considered normal. In the United States the public regards tax evasion as morally reprehensible. If he were to cheat on his taxes in Italy, Mr. Severgnini writes, “two neighbors would come round to ask me how I did it, and two more would loathe me in silence.” No one would report him.

Mr. Severgnini presents his guide as a tour that is partly geographical and partly conceptual. Over the course of 10 days, he travels from Milan to Tuscany to the far south: Sicily and Sardinia. But the places are merely excuses for little treatises on beaches, restaurants, cellphones, airports, condominiums, piazzas, gardens and offices, all sprinkled with clever observations and telling statistics.

The differences between Italian and British flight attendants, illustrated in a hilarious vignette, help explain the Italian sense of personal drama and the national talent for creatively responding to small crises. Italian flight attendants are poor at serving you coffee but good at cleaning it up and sympathizing when you spill it. Some of this is merely glib. Mr. Severgnini, himself no stranger to the lure of la bella figura, would just as soon turn a beautiful phrase as make a point, and he might do well

to heed one of his own points about the restlessly fertile Italian brain: “you can’t amaze everyone every three minutes.”

At the same time, Mr. Severgnini, as he skips lightly from one topic to the next, manages to sneak in some revealing statistics. One in three Italians finds a job through a relative. One in five has moved in the last 10 years, half the European average. Telecommuting is virtually nonexistent, engaged in by only 0.2 percent of the work force — in part, Mr. Severgnini theorizes, because it deprives Italians of the social drama of the workplace.

The Italy that Mr. Severgnini describes seethes with frustration. Government works poorly. The legal system barely functions. Too many Italians are crowded into too little space. Fear of failure stymies innovation. Mr. Severgnini is dismayed at the national genius for enjoyment and the Italian inability to plan for the future. “Our sun is setting in installments,” he writes. “It’s festive and flamboyant, but it’s still a sunset.”

Yet in many areas Italians have jumped at modernity and thrown over tradition almost casually. Cellphones are a national mania. They allow Italians to be Italian in new, entertaining ways. The shopping mall (but not Internet shopping) is popular because Italians pretend that it’s a piazza. New nonsmoking laws, widely predicted to be an absolute failure, have been accepted without a fuss. They created new gathering places and new forms of conviviality. One young man cited by Mr. Severgnini started smoking as a way to meet girls. Restaurants go in for all sorts of newfangled gadgets in their bathrooms, and Mr. Severgnini has a field day with the automated sinks, concealed light switches and baroque flush technology that challenge the Italian diner today.

There is one rule, by the way, that cannot be violated. It is wrong, and possibly illegal, to order a cappuccino after 10 a.m. This is worse than eating pizza in the middle of the day. It is nonnegotiable. Discussion over. Rosso pieno.

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